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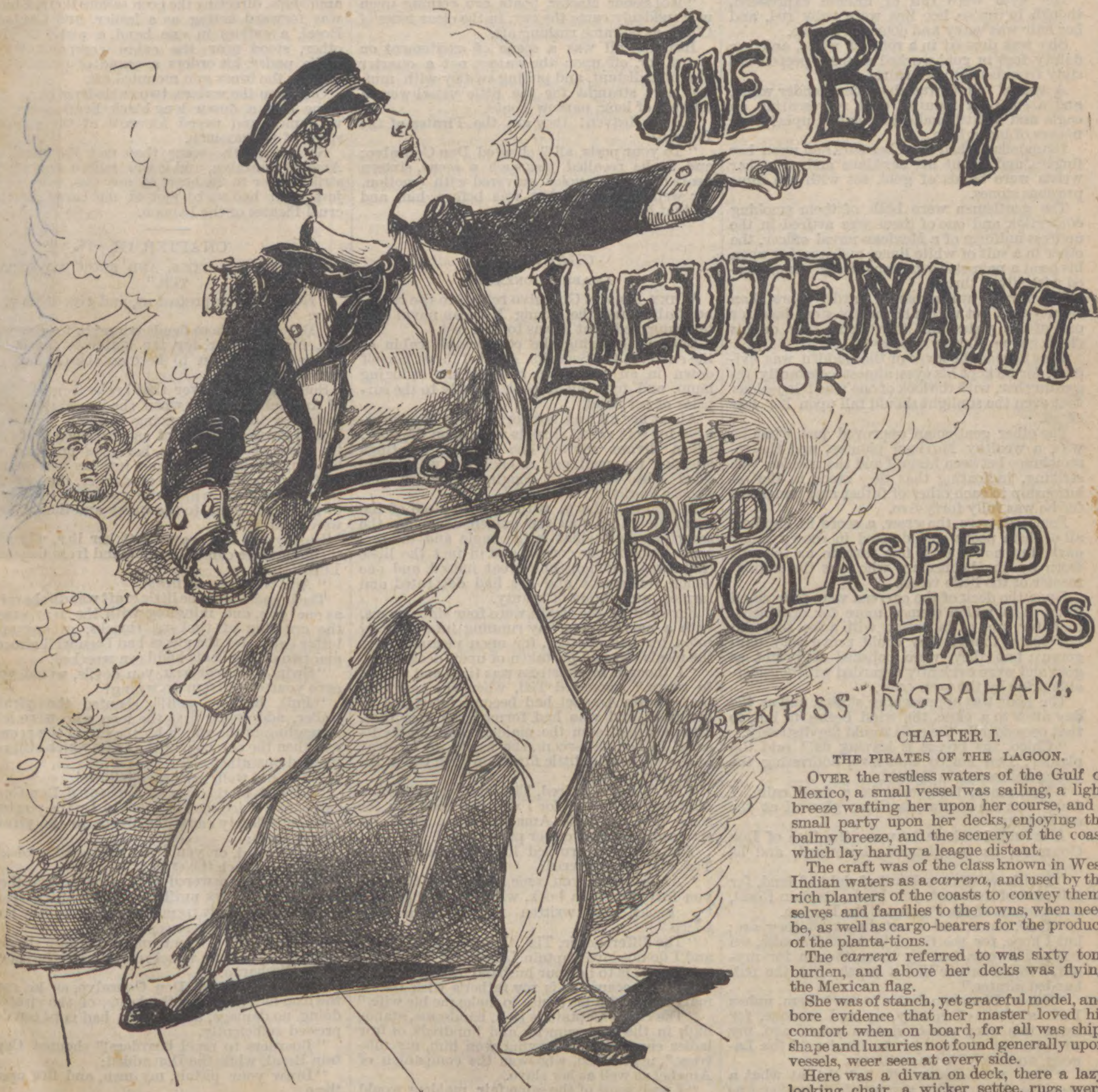
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CHAPTER I.

THE PIRATES OF THE LAGOON.

OVER the restless waters of the Gulf of Mexico, a small vessel was sailing, a light breeze wafting her upon her course, and a small party upon her decks, enjoying the balmy breeze, and the scenery of the coast which lay hardly a league distant.

The craft was of the class known in West Indian waters as a *carrera*, and used by the rich planters of the coasts to convey themselves and families to the towns, when need be, as well as cargo-bearers for the produce of the plantations.

The *carrera* referred to was sixty tons burden, and above her decks was flying the Mexican flag.

She was of stanch, yet graceful model, and bore evidence that her master loved his comfort when on board, for all was ship-shape and luxuries not found generally upon vessels, were seen at every side.

Here was a divan on deck, there a lazy looking chair, a wicker settee, rugs were

spread upon the quarter-deck, an awning shielded the after part from the rays of the sun, and a small table contained decanters of wine, silver goblets, and salvers of cakes and sweetmeats.

A Spanish guitar hung at the end of the settee, a pet dog was coiled up asleep upon a rug, a monkey balanced himself upon the taffrail, and several parrots were perched upon the back of an easy-chair.

Upon the quarter-deck were, besides a peon helmsman, four persons, one of the latter being a peon girl, whose duties were evidently those of lady's maid.

She was a pretty girl of eighteen, dressed in white, wearing a red scarf about her head, and was eye-flirting with the handsome young helmsman, whose white pants and shirt, red sash and silk skull-cap of crimson, with silver tassel, were very becoming to his dark face and fiery black eyes.

The other three, who were seated at their ease about the deck were two gentlemen and a maiden.

That they were Mexicans their dark faces and black hair and eyes denoted.

The maiden was very young, scarcely over sixteen; and yet with a form that was rounded into perfect womanhood, and a face of rare loveliness.

Her eyes were full of intense expression, though in repose, her lips were ruby red, and her hair was wavy and ebony in its hue.

She was dressed in a robe of white, and her dainty feet in gold-worked slippers peeped out slyly from beneath her skirts.

A sash of yellow was about her slender waist, and a comb of maurice gold, representing an eagle and a rattlesnake in combat, upheld her masses of black hair.

Diamonds flashed from her ears and upon her fingers, and about her necklace and upon her wrists were bands of gold, set with the same precious stones.

The gentlemen were both of them smoking *cigarritos*, and one of them was attired in the undress uniform of a Mexican naval officer, the other in a suit of white linen, and wearing upon his head a palmetto sombrero richly embroidered with silver thread.

The former was a man of hardly more than twenty-two, yet with a strangely stern face for one of his years and to which a scar on his cheek gave a sinister expression.

That he was the lover of the maiden was evident, for he kept his eyes almost constantly regarding her, with the look of one who felt jealous that even the sunlight should fall upon her fair cheek.

The other gentleman approved just what he was, a wealthy Mexican planter, and the resemblance between himself and the maiden was striking, indicating that they stood in the relationship to each other of father and daughter, for he was fully forty-five.

Forward were the crew, a score in number, all of them peons, and dressed in snowy sailor garb, but not of such fine texture as the suit worn by the helmsman, who was the sailing-master of the little vessel.

Upon the deck of the *carrera* were four small brass guns, which seemed more for ornament, than for use, as in action with a foe they did not look as though they could prove very dangerous; but they were polished as bright as gold and were evidently regarded with considerable pride by the peon crew.

The hour was approaching sunset, and as the day drew to a close, the wind began to lull, so that occasionally the sails would flap listlessly.

"Chico, the breeze is leaving us?" said the planter, Don Maceo Gonzalvo, addressing the young helmsman in Spanish.

"Yes, senor, there will be a dead calm, I fear," was the answer, as Chico glanced at the sea and sky.

A troubled look came upon the face of Don Gonzalvo, as he glanced shoreward, and he said:

"I wish we were well out of sight of land, for this part of the coast, you know, Captain Rosal, is the haunt of the Pirates of the Lagoon."

"True, senor, and a cut-throat lot they are; but I hope, for the Senorita Amabel's sake, we will not be attacked by them, though for myself, I would rather like a brush with the red-handed pirates."

"Senor, I have no desire to meet them, unless I am assured of victory, ay and revenge, for upon this very coast, sixteen years ago, my *carrera* was attacked by the Pirates of the Lagoon, and my wife was with me."

"They were beaten off, but oh! at what a sacrifice, for my wife, my Amabel's mother was wounded, and when the fight had ended I had

to mourn her death, though she left me a little daughter to cheer my life, or all would have been desolate indeed—see! the wind has left us wholly."

"It has indeed, senor, and the sun will soon do the same," answered Captain Luis Rosal.

Just then a couple of servants came out of the cabin, bearing trays, while a third followed with three small Gipsy tables.

One of the tables was placed before the Don, Amabel and Captain Rosal, and the servants proceeded to help them to the tempting supper which had been prepared for them.

As the meal was finished darkness fell upon the sea, and the vessel lay idly rocking upon the placid waters.

One by one the stars came out and illumined the scene, and taking up her guitar Amabel began to sing some touching little Spanish air, her exquisite voice floating far out over the waters in the deathlike stillness that rested upon the sea.

Tiring at last of singing, Amabel bade her father and Captain Rosal good-night, and accompanied by Tizi, her peon maid, she sought the cabin, while Don Gonzalvo and Captain Rosal had hammocks stretched for them on deck, and reclining in them, lazily smoked their *cigarritos*.

"Ho! Senor Master, boats are coming upon us!" suddenly came the cry, in the clear tones of Chico, as he came rushing aft.

Instantly all was a scene of excitement on board, for, off upon the waters, not a quarter of a mile distant, and pulling swiftly with muffled oars straight for the little vessel were a number of long, narrow boats.

"Holy Heaven! they are the Pirates of the Lagoon!"

"To your posts, all!" shouted Don Gonzalvo; and as he recalled just such a scene, sixteen years before, his voice quivered with emotion, for well he knew what was before him and all that he had to defend.

CHAPTER II.

AMABEL GONZALVO.

WHEN Amabel Gonzalvo retired to the cabin, her father and the young Mexican naval captain supposed that it was to seek rest.

But upon entering the comfortable cabin of the *carrera*, the Senorita Amabel threw herself down in an easy-chair, beneath the swinging lamp, and took up a book, greatly to the surprise of her maid.

About her all was comfortable to luxuriousness, for soft velvet carpets were upon the floor, silken divans invited one to rest, paintings adorned the wall, and a bookcase was there, filled with the latest English, Spanish and French works of that age.

A beautiful harp, with a head-piece of the same design as was the golden comb in the senorita's hair—that is the eagle and the serpent—stood in one corner, and in fact the little cabin was a delightful retreat indeed, and one which refinement and art had decorated and formed into a *bijou* of beauty.

Forward of the cabin were four state-rooms, with a narrow gangway running into a dining *salon* for bad weather, for upon pleasant days the meals were all partaken of upon deck.

"I thought my mistress was tired and wished to retire," suggested Tizi, when she saw that the Senorita Amabel had become interested in her book, and who had formed the idea that, after she had seen the maiden comfortably located in her state-room, she would go on deck and enjoy a quiet little flirtation with Chico the peon skipper.

"No, I am not tired, Tizi, and you can go on deck and see Chico; for I will not need you for some time yet," said Amabel with a smile, for she read the desire of her pretty maid.

The red blood rushed into the dark face of Tizi, and she answered:

"Ah, senorita, you come away from the man you love, to read a book, while I would give all the books ever written for an hour with Chico."

"The difference is, Tizi, that you love Chico, and I do not love Captain Luis Rosal."

"Yet he is to be your husband, senorita."

"True, because it is my father's wish that I marry him, and his desire to make me his wife."

"The Senor Captain is rich, handsome, stands high in the Government, and hundreds of fair ladies envy you for having won him, my mistress," urged Tizi, who was the companion of Amabel as well as her slave.

"I wish some of the same fair maidens would win him from me, Tizi, for I do not love him, as

scenes that I read of in this book tell me I should love the man I would make my husband.

"Ah me! I would die for one I love, and yet I have never met that one, and the good Mother grant I meet him not when it is too late, for wretched indeed would my life be."

"I know now, my mistress, why you have not seemed happy of late: it is because you are to marry one you do not love."

"I am not unhappy, Tizi: for it might as well be Captain Rosal as any one else as I love no one; but I would rather not marry at all—Hark! what sounds are those on deck?"

"Oh Heaven have mercy! we are attacked by the Pirates of the Lagoon, and right off this coast my poor mother met her fate at their cruel hands."

White with fear, yet now calm, Amabel went upon deck, while Tizi, in an agony of dread, had thrown herself upon the cabin floor, where she lay moaning and praying alternately.

The scene that met the gaze of Amabel Gonzalvo, as she reached the deck was a thrilling one.

The peon crew were at the guns, the flaming matches of the gunners lighting up the vessel and the dark faces and white-clad forms of the crew presenting a striking scene.

Don Gonzalvo, armed to the teeth, stood amidships, directing the peon sailors there, Chico was forward acting as a leader, and Captain Rosal, a cutlass in one hand, a pistol in the other, stood near the cabin companionway, while, under his orders a squad of peons were loading the brass gun mounted aft.

Out upon the waters, two cable-lerg'hs away, came half a dozen long black boats, crowded with men, and urged forward at the utmost speed of the oarsmen.

Such was the scene that met the gaze of Amabel Gonzalvo, and it was indeed enough to strike terror to the heart of any one, who knew just what had to be met at the hands of the cruel Pirates of the Lagoon.

CHAPTER III.

"AT THEM, SEA DOGS, AND SHOW NO QUARTER."

"HOLY Mother protect us, and give to us victory."

"But should those fiends triumph, forgive my act, Mary Mother, for far better is death by my own hand, than to become the captive of merciless men!"

Such was the prayer that broke from the lips of Amabel Gonzalvo, when she beheld the scene described in the foregoing chapter, and she looked grandly beautiful as she stood there in the glare of the torches, her eyes upraised to heaven, and one hand thrust into her bosom and half drawing forth a small dagger, the deadly instrument with which she meant to take her own life if it came to the worst and the pirates were triumphant.

Hardly had the prayer left her lips, when in thrilling tones came the command from Captain Luis Rosal:

"Aim true, peons! fire!"

The broadside of the little craft was discharged as one gun, and mingling with the roar came the crashing of timbers, shrieks, groans and bitter cathes, for the pieces had been well aimed, and two of the boats had been wrecked.

"Swim to the *carrera*, you devils, would you save yourselves from drowning!"

"Pull, hounds, pull!" shouted the pirate leader, addressing first the men who were left struggling in the water by the fire of the peons, and then the oarsmen of the boats which still remained unscathed.

"You did well, my brave fellows!"

"Give it to them again!" shouted Don Gonzalvo, in a voice that was heard by the pirates, for immediately came the words in the pirate chief's tones:

"Pull hard, or you'll get another broadside before you reach the craft!"

The pirates answered with a cheer, and they bent to their oars until they fairly lifted their long, narrow boats from the water at every tremendous pull on the sweeps.

"Ready! fire!" commanded Captain Rosal, and again the little vessel reeled under the shock of the discharge.

"Too bad!" cried Don Gonzalvo, as he saw the iron hail pass over the heads of the pirates, doing no damage, as the guns had not been depressed sufficiently.

"Boarders to repel boarders!" shouted Captain Rosal, while the Don added:

"Draw your pistols, my men, and fire upon them."

"Then meet them with your cutlasses!"

A fusilade of small-arms was at once begun, and the pirates were almost staggered by the leaden storm upon them; but their leader, standing up in his boat urged them on, and the next moment there came the crash, as they ran alongside of the *carrera*, and then over the sides they threw themselves in the maddest, most reckless way.

Don Gonzalvo, Captain Rosal and Chico, backed by the peon crew met them bravely, and sent in a telling fire; but the leader of the outlaws, a tall, black-bearded man, armed with a long cutlass, beat back those before him and gaining a footing on the deck, was soon followed by his men.

Then hot and savage waged the fight, the *carrera* crew being slowly driven aft from forward, the rattle of pistols, clash of steel, oaths of the pirates, shrill war-cries of the peons, and commands of the leaders making up a turmoil that was fearful to hear and awful to behold.

And there was one who did behold the dread scene, and that one was Amabel Gonzalvo.

Like a statue she stood at the entrance to the companionway gazing upon the scene of carnage, her lips quivering with prayer, her face white as death, and one hand firmly grasping the jewel-hilted dagger she had determined to drive into her breast, should the pirates prove victorious.

The situation had now become desperate for the defenders of the *carrera*, for the pirates had boarded over the bows, to avoid the fire of the guns, and had pressed the crew back steadily before them.

The peons were outnumbered two to one, and their outlaw adversaries reveled in the scene of carnage.

Their tall leader seemed to bear a charmed life, for several times had he been fired upon by Don Gonzalvo and Captain Luis Rosal, yet without seemingly wounding him.

Chico had twice been slightly wounded, and both Don Gonzalvo and Captain Rosal had received a shot, one in the arm, the other in the shoulder; but they knew that it was death to surrender, and more, they were aware that Amabel looked to their courage to defend her.

Half of the peon crew were either dead or dying, and the force of the pirates were still driving them aft.

One peon sailor, losing his nerve, threw down his weapon and cried for quarter, to instantly fall dead beneath the blow of the pirate chief's cutlass, while in hoarse tones came the order:

"Show no peon mercy, you hounds! but woo unto the man who kills Don Gonzalvo and that young naval captain, for they are golden game."

"Men, you hear! they show no mercy, so give none and fight to the death!" shouted Don Gonzalvo.

"To the death it is!"

"Die right here, men!" came the clear voice of Luis Rosal, while Chico ordered, speaking in his native tongue:

"Peons, show that you do not fear to die!"

With renewed ardor on both sides, the battle now raged; but steadily backward were forced the vessel's brave defenders.

They knew that there was no hope, but they meant to fight to the bitter end.

Standing in the companionway, her frightened maid, Tizi, kneeling on the deck, and clinging about her feet, Amabel Gonzalvo watched the backward tide of those who so bravely defended her.

The flashing of firearms illumined the decks, and she saw all that took place, beheld her father, her lover, and Chico and his peon crew battling against desperate odds:

"All is lost, and a cruel fate must end my life here as it did my mother's!"

"Alas! alas! my father and all must die."

"A moment more and may Heaven forgive my taking my own life!"

She raised the dagger above her bosom as she spoke, when suddenly a tall form bounded over the taffrail and springing to her side seized the uplifted dagger, wrenching it from her hand.

With a shriek of terror, that rung above the din of conflict, Amabel staggered back into the entrance of the companionway, while she heard the joyful words:

"No, sweet girl, you are not to die by your own hand, for I have come to save you."

The voice was rich in tone, and the speaker wore a uniform that proclaimed him a naval officer, while following him over the stern of the *carrera* were a score of gallant sailors.

As his men reached the deck, in tones that rung like clarion notes, were heard the thrilling words:

"At them, Sea Dogs! and show them no quarter!"

CHAPTER IV.

THE RESCUE.

IN amazement at the specter-like way in which the strangers had come upon the *carrera*, mingled with joy at their proving to be friends, Amabel Gonzalvo unheeded the almost command of the young leader to go into the cabin, and stood regarding their advance to the aid of the vessel's defenders.

So sudden had been the arrival of the relief party, so wholly unexpected, that the Lagoon Pirates knew not of their presence on the vessel, until the young captain suddenly bounded into the midst of the combat, and with one sweep of his cutlass laid two of the outlaws dead at his feet.

A cry of despair went up from the peons at first, for they believed that another boat-load of pirates had come to aid their comrades, and had taken them in the rear; but this was at once changed to joy, when they saw that the new arrivals were their friends.

Starting his men in a desperate rush, the young officer drove the pirates back like sheep before him, and though the outlaws still outnumbered their adversaries, this unlooked-for onslaught unnerved them, and they fled in terror, unheeding the wild cries of their leader to fight it out for the craft was theirs.

Seeing that he had no chance to check his men, in the panic that had seized upon them, the pirate chief reluctantly turned and bounded over the side into his boat.

Hastily seizing their oars the outlaws pulled away as best they could, escaping in three of their boats, and with a loss of half the force with which they had come to the attack.

Springing to one of the guns, the gallant leader of the rescue-party turned it upon the retreating pirates, and himself applied the match.

With the roar of the gun came the crash of timbers, mingled with oaths and cries of wounded men, while cheers broke from those on the *carrera's* decks.

"Hold, men! they have had a little lesson!" called out the officer, as his crew were preparing to keep up the fire upon the rapidly retreating pirates.

"Senor, do you believe in showing mercy to such devils?" angrily cried Captain Rosal, springing to one of the guns, as though to fire it.

"I do not believe in firing upon even a pirate in retreat, sir, nor shall I permit it to be done," was the calm reply.

"Ha! do you dare dictate to me, sir, and upon this deck?" angrily said Luis Rosal.

"I do, senor, and I mean just what I say."

"Ho, there, peons! load these guns and fire on those flying pirates!" shouted the young Mexican captain furiously.

"Hold, there, peons! for at your peril touch these guns," came the stern order of the stranger.

The peons fell back, for there was that in the look of the man before them, as he stood in the full glare of the battle lanterns, that completely mastered them.

"By the Eagle and the Serpent, but this is too much! and upon the deck where I command," shouted Captain Rosal, and he hastily raised his blood-stained cutlass as though to attack the stranger.

But the latter stood unmoved, and said calmly:

"Beware, Senor Mexican, for you want no quarrel with me."

"Ay, do I, Sir Stranger," was the quick response, and he sprung forward with uplifted sword just as Don Gonzalvo, who had rushed aft to greet his daughter after the combat was ended, approached with Amabel leaning upon his arm, intending to thank their gallant rescuer.

"Hold, Rosal! what madness is this?" cried the Don.

"I will not harm him, sir."

"There is your sword, senor," was the cool response of the stranger, addressing Don Gonzalvo first, and then disarming Luis Rosal as quick as a flash and handing him his blade in a courtly way.

"Oh, but this is not the end of our acquaintance!" growled Luis Rosal, deeply mortified at being so cleverly disarmed before the Don, Amabel and the others; and his eyes fairly glittered with hatred as he turned them upon the stranger, who bowed and said politely:

"The senor shall find me ready to meet him again at any and all times."

Don Gonzalvo now quickly stepped forward, and, extending his hand, said:

"Senor, permit me to offer my heartfelt gratitude for the lives of my daughter, my companions and myself, for your gallant rescue has saved us from death."

"I am Don Maceo Gonzalvo, a coast planter of Mexico, and this is my daughter, the Senorita Amabel, while it would give me pleasure to present my guest, Captain Luis Rosal, of the Mexican navy, only he seems to have some quarrel against you."

"Only, senor, from the fact that I would not allow him to fire upon a flying foe, pirates though they be," said the stranger, bowing low before Amabel.

"They deserve no mercy, senor; but I commend your kindness of heart in not wishing to strike a fallen foe."

"May I ask who it is I have the honor of owing our rescue to?"

"I am Achille Murtagh, senor, an American by birth, but a captain in the Cartagena navy, and very happy at having served Don Gonzalvo and his fair daughter," and the young officer bent his gaze upon Amabel, while she blushed and looked down, as she bowed in acknowledgment of his remark.

CHAPTER V.

RIVALS.

WHILE Don Gonzalvo was profuse, in the expression of his gratitude to the Cartagena officer, Captain Luis Rosal had walked moodily to the stern of the vessel, and Amabel managed to glance slyly at her preserver.

His form was erect, tall, and his bearing was haughty, while his step was firm and confident, as of one conscious of his own power.

He was dressed in a black uniform, trimmed with silver lace, and it fitted his fine form to perfection.

He wore top boots, ornamented with silver bullion tassels in front, and garnet gloves shielded his hand, which like his feet were small and shapely.

About his slender waist was a sash of silver thread, and in it were a pair of pistols, and suspended by a gold chain, from a belt beneath, was a serviceable sword, though he carried a heavy cutlass in his hand.

His head was sheltered by a soft sombrero, embroidered in silver thread, and ornamented with a jet-black plume of great richness.

But his face was what most riveted the gaze of Amabel Gonzalvo, for its manly beauty was such that an artist would have raved about it.

Still it was a stern face, and the impress of sorrow seemed indelibly stamped upon the lips, and to haunt the dark eyes.

He wore no beard, and seemed thereby younger than he really was; but he was one to fear, as well as love, and his men seemed to stand in respectful awe of a look from his penetrating eyes, and were almost looking after the dead and wounded without any orders from him, as though they well understood what he expected of them.

If Amabel Gonzalvo was impressed with the appearance of the man who had so daringly come to their rescue, he too seemed deeply so with her, and his manner, in addressing her was most courtly and gentle.

"Lady," he said in his deep, rich voice, "I ran into a lagoon a league from here two nights ago, to repair my vessel, and discovered that I had very nearly entered a nest of pirates."

"But as they did not see me, I quietly waited for night to run out, when one of my lookouts reported your vessel becalmed off the coast, and another brought word that the Lagoon Pirates were preparing to go out and attack you."

"With my glass I saw that the *carrera* had a fair passenger on board, yourself, lady, and I determined that you should never fall into the hands of such merciless villains, as I knew the Lagoon Outlaws to be, so I took my long boat, with twenty men, and, with muffled oars, followed in the wake of the pirates, and Heaven be praised that I did so."

Such was the story of the handsome young sea-captain, and to it Amabel listened, as did her father, with the deepest interest, while the latter said:

"You certainly will be our guest to-night, Senor Captain Murtagh?"

"I thank you, Don Gonzalvo, but I have a crippled ship to look after, and those buccanniers will look my vessel up without a doubt, so that you will pardon me for declining, while, with the rising of the moon you will get a breeze and can go upon your way."

"Then may we not expect some time to have the honor of a visit from you, as you doubtless often cruise along the Mexican shores, and my home is just twenty leagues north of here?"

"I will give myself the pleasure of looking in upon you, senor— Ha! those Lagoon Pirates are

after my vessel, and I must bid you a hearty farewell.

"Senorita, we shall meet again.

"Don Gonzalvo, *adios*," and raising his sombrero the young officer walked rapidly toward the stern of the *carrera*, where his boat was made fast.

"Ho, men, to your boat, for there is work at the schooner for us!" rung out his voice, and, seeing Captain Luis Rosal near, he politely saluted, and said:

"Senor Captain, we will again meet, perhaps on sea, maybe on shore; but when and where I am at your service."

"Yes, Sir Cartagenian, we shall meet again," was the angry retort, and with a light laugh Captain Murtagh sprung over the taffrail into his boat, and the crew sent it landward through the darkness, at a speed that told that they knew the necessity of their presence at their vessel, for, from the inlet where they had left her, came the sounds of fierce combat.

"Oh, father! what a superb-looking man he is, and now he has gone to again rush into danger," cried Amabel, when Captain Murtagh had departed, and she clasped her little hands in real distress, as she peered into the darkness, trying to keep his receding boat in view.

"Yes, Amabel, he is a splendid-looking fellow, and we owe everything to him; but I regret exceedingly that he should have had a quarrel with Rosal.

"It was Captain Rosal's fault, evidently, and his overbearing manner caused him to attack a man to whom he owed his life, and who proved his master."

"Sh! Mabelle, you must not speak thus of one who is to be your husband," said the Don reproachfully.

"Alas that it is so," answered Amabel, and she walked aft and leaned over the taffrail, still trying to catch a sight of the young seaman's boat, while Don Gonzalvo set to work, with Captain Rosal's aid, to look after the wounded and give the dead a hasty burial in the sea.

"Oh, my mistress, is not that young Cartagenian a man to win a girl's heart?" whispered Tizi, coming and joining her mistress, as she leaned over the bulwarks.

"Indeed he is, Tizi, and already has he won mine."

"But you are betrothed to the senor—"

"Hush, Tizi, I know that I am bound to a man I do not love, and that I have this night met the only one who could win my whole heart with all its idolatrous worship for the being upon whom I set my affections; but hark! heard you not that ringing cry?"

"It is his voice, and he has reached his vessel—hal and the pirates fly, for listen to the cheers!"

The cries of triumphant combatants now distinctly reached the ears of those on the *carrera*'s decks, and the sounds of battle ceased.

"The combat is ended, Tizi, and the Mary Mother grant that no harm befall him.

"See! is not that a ship on fire at sea?" and Amabel pointed to a light far across the waters where sea and skies met.

"That is the moon rising, Senorita Gonzalvo," said Captain Rosal approaching her.

"Yes, I see it now, senor; it is very beautiful, rising as it does from out the sea, and it brings a breeze with it too, as Captain Murtagh said it would."

"Captain Murtagh!" sneered the young Mexican, and he added:

"Is the Cartagenian rover your oracle, senorita?"

"His words have come true, senor, and I would trust him under all circumstances; but why do you call him a rover?"

"Well, the Cartagenian cruisers are little better than pirates, and several of the captains of their navy have turned buccaneer as did this arch outlaw Lafitte."

"The same charge is also made against officers of our Mexican navy, Captain Rosal," was the quick retort.

"True, and those who have been taken, after becoming outlaws, have been promptly hanged at the yard-arm, and if a few of those Cartagenians are captured and treated in the same way, it will teach others a lesson, and I will, when next I sail, have a look at the papers of those I meet."

"I warn you, after your experience to-night at the hand of Captain Murtagh, not to attempt to call him to account as a rover," said Amabel, almost wickedly.

At her words Captain Rosal became livid, and he fairly trembled with suppressed emotion, while he said through his shut teeth:

"The Senorita Gonzalvo seems to have such a

high regard for this Cartagenian rover, that I feel almost like looking upon him as my rival for her love."

"I should feel honored, Captain Rosal, could I win the love of such a man as he who saved this *carrera* to-night, and should we meet again, and he regard me with favor, then indeed may you look upon him as your rival, and a dangerous one too."

A curse was crushed between the teeth of Luis Rosal, as he turned away, muttering:

"By the Land of the Montezumas, but she loves that man already, and there is but one way to end this, and that is to kill this Cartagenian, and I will hunt him down, for I allow no rivalry for the hand of Amabel Gonzalvo, for she is mine!"

CHAPTER VI.

THE MYSTERIOUS SCHOONER.

WITH the coming of the wind, the *carrera* got under way, bending gracefully to the breeze, and gliding along at a swift pace.

Don Gonzalvo had urged his daughter to go below, and then he tried to put the craft to rights.

The scene of beauty on the deck, when the little vessel lay so peacefully at anchor, was sadly changed, for the easy-chairs had been broken, the little tables and divan smashed to atoms, the guitar had been brought into use as a club and the rugs were saturated with the blood of friend and foe alike.

Forward lay a ghastly pile of humanity, awaiting the departure of Amabel from the deck to be thrown into the sea, and in the fore-castle were a score of wounded men, Chico, who was skilled in surgery and medicine, dressing their wounds as best he could, wholly forgetful of his own condition.

Don Gonzalvo went here and there, attending to everything, while Captain Rosal, moody and savage, devoted himself to having the dead thrown into the sea, as though such duty chimed in best with his mood.

"Sail ho!"

It was Chico that gave the cry, for, looking up from his work, his eyes had fallen suddenly upon a sail creeping along shore, and slightly ahead of the *carrera*.

Instantly every eye was upon the strange sail, while Captain Rosal, leveling his glass, said after a moment's scrutiny:

"Don Gonzalvo, we are not done with the Lagoon Pirates yet, for that is one of their vessels, I feel confident."

"Well, we will have to run for it, Rosal."

"It is doubtless the same fellow who attacked us, and came off in his boats, as there was no wind to bring him in his vessel."

"After being beaten off by that young Cartagenian, he tried to seize his vessel, and, again defeated, he returned to his own craft, determined to catch us anyhow, and only wants to get down the coast as far as possible, out of hearing of the cruiser."

"You are doubtless right, Don Gonzalvo, in your surmise, and he will come up with us at the point below unless we change our course."

"We will change it, and at once, and head right back to the protection of the Cartagenian."

"No, no, sir, I would not advise that," hastily protested Captain Rosal, who could not bear the thought of Amabel again meeting the man he now looked upon as a rival.

"We can run right out to sea, senora, and the Lady of the Gulf is too fast for any craft to catch her in this breeze."

"I would much prefer to return to the protection of the Cartagenian, for I dislike to take any chances, Rosal, and fleet as the Lady of the Gulf certainly is, yonder craft is really forging ahead of her."

"Ho, Chico!"

"Yes, senor," and the young peon approached.

"Chico, I am confident that this craft in chase of us is the very pirate whom we drove off, and he is trying to again attempt our capture, so I will run back to the protection of the Cartagenian cruiser."

"Yes, senor."

"Sail ho!" shouted Captain Luis Rosal in a voice that fairly rung with joy.

"By Neptune! but she heads us off, and we have to run to sea!" cried Don Gonzalvo, as he discerned the new sail astern of them, though a long distance off.

"Chico, we will stand straight out to sea and see if the Lady of the Gulf cannot drop her disagreeable company," and though hopeful, Don Gonzalvo looked anxious, the cloud upon his brow deepening as Amabel suddenly appeared upon deck, accompanied by her faithful maid.

"Father, there is still danger threatening us," she said, as she saw the *carrera* headed seaward.

"There is a strange sail inshore which we wish to avoid, my child, to be on the safe side."

"As she was heading us off, father, why not run back to the protection of the Cartagenian?"

"Well, Amabel, such was my intention, until I saw that we had another strange sail astern of us," answered the Don, who now saw that he could hide nothing from his daughter.

"Your glass, please, Captain Rosal," and the young Mexican placed it in her hand.

After a long look through it at both vessels, Amabel said slowly:

"Father, I have seen that vessel inshore often, when it has gone by our coast, at times when I have been riding along the shore, and I remember that one of our peon fishermen said it was a Lagoon Pirate."

"The craft astern is an American schooner, such as the Gulf Pirates have, and I think we have cause to dread both."

"Such was my opinion, Amabel, and we will therefore have to depend upon the speed of the Lady of the Gulf."

"See! the fellow inshore has changed his course too, and is now in pursuit."

"Yes, Don Maceo, and he is a lateen-rig, and evidently a Lagoon Pirate, for, now that he comes out from under the shadow of the shore, I can see him distinctly," said Captain Luis Rosal.

"The schooner still holds in along the coast," remarked Amabel.

The *carrera* was soon put under full sail, and all watched most anxiously her flight, and whether the lateen-rig astern was gaining upon her.

A half hour's chase proved conclusively that the pirate was gaining at a slapping pace, and every face in the Lady of the Gulf looked blue.

Putting her glass again to her eyes, Amabel bent her gaze upon the American schooner, which, after a while she discovered directly in the wake of the Lagoon Pirate.

"Oh father! that mysterious schooner is following the pirate now," she cried.

"Yes, and is gaining on him as rapidly as he on us," said the Don.

"And doubtless they are in league together as the pirate seems to show no dread of the schooner," remarked Captain Luis Rosal.

"Oh that Captain Murtagh only knew our danger," came with a sigh from the lips of the maiden, which, low as was the utterance it reached the ears of Luis Rosal, who hissed forth:

"Rather than that she should be saved by that man a second time, I would sooner see her the captive of the Lagoon Pirates."

"Oh, but I will track that Cartagenian to the death, if ever I escape from the danger now threatening!"

And Captain Rosal walked forward among the crew, for he dared not trust himself to remain near Amabel and the Don until he had gained control over his revengeful emotions, which completely mastered him.

CHAPTER VII.

A DOUBLE SURPRISE.

THE moon, though on the wane, shone brightly, and its silvery light, reflected upon the white sails of the three vessels, rendered the scene as pretty as well as an exciting one.

The little *carrera* was fairly staggering under the canvas she carried, for the wind was momentarily increasing, and the waves were beginning to be rough enough to tell against her small hull.

The lateen-rig astern was much larger, and also under a cloud of canvas forged through the waters at a swift pace and one that began to tell, for she was gaining rapidly, and not the distance of a mile now intervened between her and the chase.

Her decks, the glasses revealed, were swarming with men, and beyond all doubt she was one of the craft known as the Lagoon Pirates, and the very one whose crew had attacked the *carrera* in the early part of the evening.

Astern of the pirate, and with the same distance dividing her from him as was now between the two vessels ahead, came the American schooner.

Her hull was low in the water, while her masts arose to a great height, and she spread a vast amount of canvas and stood up well under the pressure upon her.

By watching her closely with her glass, Mabel saw that she was gaining even more rapidly upon the lateen-rig, than was the latter upon

the *carrera*, and she so reported to her father and Captain Rosal, who just then walked aft, having smothered his angry feelings, at least outwardly.

"Yes, those are two remarkably fast vessels in chase of us," said the captain.

"They are, indeed, to pick up the little Gulf Lady, as they are doing," rejoined the Don.

"You think that they are both in chase of us then, father?"

"Yes, Amabel, for what else can they be doing?"

"That they are in league is shown by the lateen-rig taking no notice of the schooner so close in his wake, and I know that the Lagoon Pirates have half a dozen good vessels in their fleet, several of which are American schooners they have captured or bought," said Captain Rosal.

"And it is a shame that our Government does not put an end to this Lagoon League, which is becoming most powerful indeed, and whose haunts extend from the Sabine to Campeche," indignantly said Don Gonzalvo.

"My dear Don, let me make known to you, and to the Senorita Amabel, a secret.

"The Government has, at my suggestion, taken a stand in the matter, and my new vessel, the brig-of-war *Patrol*, is destined for service against this Lagoon League of Pirates, my cruising-ground being from the mouth of the Sabine to Campeche and back."

"Indeed! I am delighted to know this, for of late we dwellers near the coast, Captain Rosal, have been in dread of visits from these Lagoon Pirates, and now that you are to hunt them, I feel confident that they will be forced to seek haunts elsewhere than along the Mexican shores."

"Thank you, Don Gonzalvo, for your good opinion of me, and let me say that this secret I have not before divulged, and wish it to remain unknown still to others.

"When I urged that the senorita should become my wife on the first of next month, this was my motive, as I have to sail on the tenth on my mission.

"You were kind enough to set the day, and ask me to accompany you to Vera Cruz, to make the purchases which the senorita desired, and I sincerely hope our little voyage will not prove one of sorrow to us all."

"Captain Rosal," said Amabel earnestly, "I thank you for your confidence, and I wish you success in your expedition against the Lagoon League of Pirates; but, let me now say that I have decided to postpone our nuptials for the present, as I prefer to wait until after you have successfully carried out your orders from the Government."

Captain Rosal turned white, but remained silent, while Don Gonzalvo said quickly:

"But, Amabel, my child, all preparations for the wedding have been made, and—"

"Father, to-night we barely escaped a fearful fate, and now upon our wake hang two foes, pursuing us to the death, and I care not to speak of anticipated joy as a bride, with a cruel end staring us in the face.

"If we escape, I shall do penance for one month in thankfulness, as I have vowed to do, and hence I shall postpone my wedding-day indefinitely."

"But, lady, remember that I have to sail upon my perilous duty, and—"

"Captain Rosal, when you have executed your duty, return to me, and then you shall know my answer; but for the present I will say no more than that I do penance for one month if we escape this night from yonder pirates."

"Heaven knows, my child, I would willingly bind myself to do penance too, should we escape; but alas! it seems that we must prepare to meet the worst, for they gain most rapidly upon us," said the Don sadly.

"Yes," and we are powerless to resist; but, Senorita Amabel, I will sacrifice my life in defending you, that you may see how true is my devotion to you."

"I thank you, Captain Rosal, for your bravery in my behalf, and am glad to know that in protecting me you are defending your own life too; but see, was that not a flash on board the pirate?"

"Yes, it is a torch, and they intend to open fire upon us, and their aim will be good I fear, as day is breaking," the Don remarked.

The skies were now growing gray overhead, while in the east a rosy light, the forerunner of the rising sun, was visible.

A few moments of suspense now followed, and then came a red glare from the bows of the pirate nearest astern, and immediately after

followed the roar of a heavy gun, and a solid shot flew over the *carrera's* decks.

But the Don gave no order to come to, and Chico, who held the helm, kept the craft unswervingly upon her course.

As the daylight made things more distinct, the little vessel presented a scene that demonstrated clearly what a fiery ordeal she had passed through.

The decks were still blood-stained, here and there the planking and bulwarks were cut by bullets, the masts bore the same marks, the sails were cut in several places, and the faces of all were white and haggard.

A few moments of suspense, and then a second shot was fired, and with such precision that the bowsprit was shattered to atoms and a peon was killed.

With her bowsprit gone the *carrera* broached to and lost headway, and all felt that the bitter end had come, until a cry from Chico caused every eye to turn upon their foes.

The American schooner had, meanwhile, changed her course, from following directly in the wake of the lateen-rig, and running off on the starboard tack, until she gained a point, where she would not have the *carrera* in range of her guns, and then suddenly a sheet of flame burst from her broadside, and half a dozen guns sent their iron rain upon the lateen-rig craft.

The effect was disastrous, for the pirate was seen, by all on board the *carrera* to be severely hurt, while the peons burst forth in a cheer, and Don Gonzalvo shouted:

"He is not a pirate at all, but our friend!"

"Father, he flies the Cartagena flag!" cried Amabel excitedly, and her words brought an oath from the lips of Captain Luis Rosal, while again he muttered:

"A second time does she owe her life to that man. My duty is plain, and the sooner I am at sea in my brig the better."

In the mean time, while the peon crew sprung to repair the damages to the *carrera* the pirate was seen to be recovering from its shock and surprise, and preparing to meet the American schooner which was bearing down upon him, its men at their guns.

"Can it be possible that the pirates had not discovered the Cartagena in their wake?" asked the Don.

"So it would seem, senor, for they were doubtless so taken up with chasing us, as not to have sighted her in chase; but I observe that the Cartagena rover has fewer men than are on the pirate, so with your permission I will take a dozen of your good peons and go to his aid."

"This is generous of you, Rosal; but I almost fear to leave the craft so short-handed, and we must get a new bowsprit rigged, while that young captain can take care of himself—see! he signals us!"

Chico read the signals aloud:

"Rig a new bowsprit with all haste and fly, for that craft is the flagship of the Lagoon League, under El Moro, the pirate chief himself."

"That Captain Murtagh is a noble fellow, Rosal, for the pirate outnumbers him in men and guns, and his vessel is much larger too."

"It seems wrong to run off and leave him to fight for us, but what are we to do, for with my seventeen peons, and half of those wounded, I can do nothing," said Don Gonzalvo anxiously.

"Senor, permit me to have eight of your men, in a small boat, and you continue your flight in the *carrera* with the remainder of your crew, for the Senorita Amabel's safety must not be again risked, and I assure you our little boat's crew will be of great aid to the Cartagena."

"You are very kind, Captain Rosal, but when the bowsprit is rigged, I will retire to the cabin, and we can aid Captain Murtagh with our guns, by running closer, for I will not consent to your doing so foolhardily a thing as trying to reach the schooner in a small boat," said Amabel firmly.

"By the Mexican Sun! but I almost believe she read my purpose, to board the schooner and see that her captain did not come out of this action alive, and pray heaven he does not as it is!" muttered Captain Rosal, whose mad jealousy had completely changed his nature from a high-toned man of honor to a level with the common assassin.

In the mean time the schooner was standing down toward the pirate, who had his guns cleared for action, and both vessels were taking in their extra canvas and preparing for a conflict which each seemed to know would be a bitter one.

CHAPTER VIII.

RUNNING INTO A TRAP.

KNOWING that their lives depended upon their work, the peon crew lost no time in rigging a

bowsprit and repairing the damage done by the well-aimed shot of the pirate.

So rapidly did they work, under the direction of Chico, that the action between the two vessels had hardly begun, when the *carrera* was ready to be put on her course again.

The Cartagena had his men at their guns, a band of boarders ready amidships, and though short-handed, was moving down upon the pirate with evident intent of coming to close quarters.

His guns were manned with perfect coolness, fired as regularly as though saluting, and, with a cigar between his teeth Captain Murtagh stood upon his quarter-deck, a boarding helmet upon his head, and a belt of arms about his waist.

This much Amabel saw, as she gazed through her glass, and more, she could not but admire the calm consciousness of victory, that the young captain wore in the presence of a desperate foe.

Then she turned her glass upon the pirate.

She saw that he carried sixteen guns, six more than did the schooner and that his decks showed more than a hundred men visible, and a wild, hard-looking lot they were, with their red skull-caps, and stripped to the waist for their red work.

Taken by surprise as the pirates were, and checked in their pursuit of the *carrera*, and a second time thwarted by the captain of the cruiser, it was very evident that they meant to take a sweet revenge upon the schooner's crew, after which they hoped to overhaul the little craft of Don Gonzalvo, which they evidently knew, and were aware that it would prove a valuable prize for them.

Upon the quarter-deck of the outlaw craft, Amabel beheld the famous Corsair Commodore of the Lagoon League Pirate Fleet, and one whose name was a terror along the whole Gulf shores.

She saw a tall man, with broad shoulders, a long black beard, and hair worn in wavy masses—in fact, the very same leader who had boarded the *carrera* the night before!

A splendid looking man he was, and his vessel was certainly a beautiful one, from hull to truck, but somehow Amabel seemed to prefer to gaze upon the schooner, and her young commander, while her lips murmured a prayer for his safety.

"See, father, the Cartagena cruiser signals again," she cried.

Again Chico was called upon to read the signals, and said:

"He signals that you must fly, as, if the fire of the pirate cripples him, he will leave him and go right on in chase of the *carrera*, senor."

"Signal back that we will attack the pirate too," said the Don.

Chico quickly obeyed, and back came the answer:

"You have no right to risk your daughter's safety. Do as I tell you, for El Moro is merciless to men and women alike, and if we meet death it is but the fate of those who go to sea to battle."

"That is the answer of a noble man, Rosal, and I will do as he says; but first, I will double-shot the guns with grape, bear down as near as I dare and give it to him, for it will at least thin out his crew," and, Don Gonzalvo ordered Chico to head the *carrera* on a course that would approach the pirate in such a way that he would not be able to fire on them, without endangering himself from a broadside from the schooner.

The pirate crew showed some excitement, as could be plainly seen, when they beheld the *carrera*, instead of flying, apparently coming down to join the cruiser in the attack upon them, while Captain Murtagh hastily signaled again to urge Don Gonzalvo to flight.

"You, senorita, must go into the cabin," urged Captain Rosal, as he started forward to personally supervise the loading of the guns.

"I shall remain here, Captain Rosal, and take the same risks that my father, and those who are defending me do," was the answer of Amabel, and the Mexican officer noticed that she did not mention him by name, but classed him among her other defenders.

Don Gonzalvo then begged his daughter to retire to the cabin with Tizi, but Amabel was firm in her resolve to remain, and seeing that he could not move her he desisted sadly, and sought a post where he could be of service.

The battle was now raging fiercely between the pirate and the cruiser, and Amabel was watching it with more interest than she was bestowing upon the movements of the *carrera*, and the actions of those upon her deck.

She saw the tall form of Captain Murtagh,

calm and fearless in mien, giving his orders to his crew, and upon the pirate was El Moro, the corsair commodore, issuing commands in thundering tones to his gunners.

"Sink that accursed *carrera*!" she heard him yell to his men, and the bows of the pirate were wearing around to give the little vessel a broadside when, quick as though on a pivot, the schooner luffed sharp, and the broadside she poured upon the outlaw was so terrible that it took all idea of the *carrera* out of the minds of her crew.

Going about, the schooner gave the pirate another broadside, and then, in the midst of the death and confusion it caused, Captain Rosal called out:

"Peons, fire!"

The *carrera* reeled under the discharge of her light battery, double-shotted as were the guns, and, well aimed, the grape went tearing across the decks of the pirate.

"Now let her fly, Chico!" cried Don Gonzalvo, and under all the sail that could be crowded upon her, the fleet little craft darted away in flight, having dealt her blow, and done her worst against her cruel foe.

"By the stars of night, behold how that superb fellow goes into action!"

"Hark! how his guns roar, and see how he handles his splendid schooner!" cried Don Gonzalvo, lost in admiration at the manner in which Captain Murtagh fought his cruiser.

Involuntarily Captain Rosal responded:

"Yes, I never saw a vessel so well handled, or a cooler crew in action; but for all, the pirate will be the victor, for the Cartagenian is no match for him."

"You are mistaken, Senor Captain, for behold! the pirate flies!" cried Amabel excitedly.

"By the dogs of war! you are right, Senorita Gonzalvo," shouted Captain Rosal in a burst of enthusiasm, and then added, as he saw that his rival was driving the pirate:

"The buccaneer has some motive for this, and will lead the Cartagenian into a trap."

"I sincerely trust not. Ho, Chico, can we not fire a gun to attract the attention of the cruiser, and then signal for him to give up the chase, as the pirate is playing a trick to entrap him?" called out Don Gonzalvo.

"I can fire the gun, Senor Master, and signal; but that young captain does not seem the man to give up," answered Chico.

"Try him, at any rate."

The gun was fired and Chico signaled:

"Don Gonzalvo begs you to give up the chase, as the pirate is leading you into a trap, for he doubtless has other vessels hiding inshore."

Back came the signal:

"Thanks to Gonzalvo; but I shall run El Moro to his lair, and beg that the *carrera* will continue her flight, as I know that there are other vessels of the Lagoon League in hiding on the coast."

Chico read the return signal, and Amabel turned away, while the tears came into her beautiful eyes.

Captain Rosal saw the change that came upon her face, and gritted his teeth in silent rage.

All eyes now turned upon the flying pirate and the pursuing schooner, and watched the hot fire kept up between them, the former from her stern guns, the latter from her bow chasers, until they rounded a point of land and disappeared from view.

But a few moments after their disappearance, hot and furious became the firing, and Captain Rosal's face brightened as he said:

"The pirate has led that reckless fool into a trap, as I suspected, and he has now to fight the the outlaw fleet and his doom is certain."

CHAPTER IX.

THE THREE PIRATES.

WHEN the Cartagenian cruiser started in chase of the pirate, the latter vessel kept up a sullen fire upon her pursuer, which was returned with the regularity of minute guns.

What motive had prompted the flight of the outlaw, the young captain of the schooner seemed to understand, for he turned to one who stood by his side, and said quietly:

"El Moro means to lead me into a trap; but he little dreams how I can get out of it."

"They are signaling, senor, from the *carrera*," said a sub-officer, approaching.

"Ah, yes," and Captain Murtagh turned his face upon the flying craft, while he continued:

"They warn me of the very danger that I just referred to, Seawaif."

"The trap, senor?"

"Yes," and the young captain ordered the answer returned, which the reader has already heard read by Chico the peon.

"If there are other vessels on the coast, senor, how can we escape them?" asked the one addressed as Seawaif.

"That you shall soon know, Seawaif; and more, you shall be the one to represent me in an interview with Chief El Moro."

"You mean to have an interview with him, senor?"

"I mean that you shall, my lad. Ho, there at those guns!"

"Ay, ay, sir!"

"Fire over the pirate and not to hit him," was the surprising order.

"Ay, ay, sir."

"Seawaif, you observe that he does not fire to hurt us?"

"Yes, senor, or he fires wretchedly bad."

"It is because he wants this schooner, and does not wish to harm her in the least, if he can avoid doing so. Now in yonder inlet, behind that heavy timber, El Moro has several vessels lying hidden without doubt; but he shapes his course to run by the entrance to the little harbor, while, if I follow, out of their hiding-place will dart his other cruisers, and he will have us in a tight place."

"And yet you follow him, senor?"

"Certainly, my lad, and you shall see that I can handle the famous corsair commodore by proxy, for, as I said, you shall beard the lion in his den," and Captain Murtagh left the deck and descended to his cabin, after having taken a glance at the far-away *carrera* in her flight.

The one whom he had called Seawaif was a mere lad of fourteen, and yet he wore the uniform of a junior officer.

He was a handsome youth, with curling black hair falling upon his shoulders, large earnest, deer-like eyes, and features of great regularity, and yet stamped with a strength and expression far beyond his years.

He was well formed and grown for his age; there was nothing awkward about him, and he wore at his side a sword which he knew well how to handle.

Although there were two lieutenants his superiors on board, on account of his being the right-hand of the captain, as he was called, he was looked upon as next to the commander by the crew, while his influence with Captain Murtagh was unbounded.

Watching the wooded point attentively with his glass, as the schooner sped along, Seawaif caught sight of a signal fluttering among the trees.

Instantly turning his glass upon the pirate, he saw that signals were being displayed by her, but in such a way that the sail kept them concealed from those on the schooner.

Descending into the cabin, he at once reported to Captain Murtagh what he had discovered.

"You have good eyes, Seawaif, and will some day make a great sailor, for I'll guarantee no one else on the schooner saw what you did; but it is just what I expected, and as soon as we shoot past the entrance to the inlet, you will see one or more vessels run out in our wake, and thus get us into a line between them and El Moro, so as to compel our surrender. Now go on deck again, and when you see the other vessels run out call to me."

Seawaif departed, and he kept his eyes fixed upon the shore, but saw nothing more to excite his suspicions of foul play.

Then he searched the line for a break, and soon discovered it.

"There is the inlet the chief says leads into a little harbor," he said; and still keeping his eyes upon it, he saw suddenly shoot into view, as though it came out of the green woodland itself, the long bowsprit of a vessel.

A moment after and a lateen-rigged craft, with her guns run out and her crew at quarters, was visible, while just astern of her, coming out of the inlet, was a second vessel, and either of them was the superior in size of the schooner.

As he hastily called Captain Murtagh, the pirate they were in chase of suddenly put about, and the cruiser was thus thrown between three foes, and as the three vessels opened a heavy fire upon them, the crew looked gloomily at their commander as he just then came on deck.

But upon his handsome, fearless face there was no shadow of anxiety, and he calmly looked about him and beheld the trap into which El Moro had led him, and quickly noted the fact that though he was under a cross-fire, none of the vessels seemed anxious to do him harm, as their shots were flying wide.

CHAPTER X.

THE SECRET SIGNET.

WHEN Captain Murtagh came on deck, he carried a roll of something under his arm.

Taking his glass, he looked at the vessel of El Moro a moment, then turned his gaze upon the other two craft.

"They are not going to harm us, for all their firing, but carry us by boarding, for, as I said, they wish this schooner," was Captain Murtagh's quiet remark to Seawaif, after he had taken in the situation.

The vessel of El Moro was now about three quarters of a mile away, and heading on a course to cross the schooner's bow. Besides her men at quarters, gathered in a group amidships, were a large number of boarders, while El Moro was seen standing on the quarter-deck, looking upon the situation of affairs with evident satisfaction.

At the fore of the pirate was a small blue flag, with a pair of red hands clasped in the center, while at the point of the huge lateen mainsail fluttered the black flag of the pirate, with the skull and cross-bones.

The other two vessels were also lateen-rigged, carrying the same flags, and their crews were manning the guns, while others were grouped for boarding, though they did not have as heavy an armament as the craft of El Moro, nor so many men.

One of these had headed so as to get to windward of the schooner, and upon her port quarters.

The other had shaped her course so as to bring her upon the starboard quarter, and thus the fire of the three, when they opened upon the cruiser, did not damage each other.

The men on the schooner eyed their young captain fixedly, wondering what he would do against such odds; but they did not look as though they meant to flinch from the work before them.

"Here, Seawaif, haul down the flag of Cartagena, and run this up in its stead," ordered Captain Murtagh giving the boy a roll of bunting.

Seawaif at once drew down the flag from the peak, and as he did so, Captain Murtagh called out to one of his lieutenants:

"Senor Salvator, lay the schooner to, as the flag goes up, and let fall my boat to board yonder craft."

"Ay ay, sir; but you surely do not intend to surrender—"

"Do as I tell you, Senor Salvator," was the stern rejoinder of the young captain. At that moment the flag was hauled up to the peak by Seawaif, and, shaken loose, it revealed a large blue field, with red clasped hands in the center—the same as the small flag at the fore of the pirate vessels.

Instantly the pirates ceased firing, and up into the wind then swept the schooner, and calling to Seawaif to follow him Captain Murtagh entered his cabin.

In a few moments the youth came out, went over the side into the waiting boat, and was pulled rapidly away toward the vessel of El Moro, which still stood on toward the schooner, the pirates, one and all seemingly greatly amazed at the action of the cruiser.

Seeing the boat approaching El Moro rapidly signaled his other vessels, and the three at once lay to, and all eyes were turned upon the gig, in the stern of which sat little Seawaif, behind him fluttering a small flag like the larger one the cruiser had displayed.

As Seawaif drew near the pirate craft, he saw that she was stanchly built, with good lines, and points that proved her a fine rough, weather boat, as well as a fast one.

She was broad amidships, and she seemed to draw little water, in comparison with the schooner, though she was sixty tons heavier.

Her canvas was well set, and all about her was ship-shape, excepting that her crew dressed to please themselves, represented a dozen nationalities, and were as evil a looking set of cut-throats as could be gotten together.

The guns were bright, as were the small-arms, and seemed to have been often used.

"Boat ahoy!" came in the stentorian tones of the chief, as the gig drew near.

"Ahoy the Devastation!" was the answer in Seawaif's shrill, clear voice.

"What boat is that?"

"The Crimson Hands!" was the answer.

"Ay, ay! Come aboard," called out El Moro, when he heard this response, and soon after Seawaif walked aft and confronted the terrible chief of the Lagoon League.

The boy, however, did not flush as he looked up into the face of the man in whose power he had placed himself and said quietly:

"You are El Moro, the corsair commodore, are you not?"

"I am, and it would please me to know who you are?" and El Moro looked down upon the

lad in a way that showed he was surprised at his temerity, and admired his pluck.

El Moro had the appearance of a man with whom the world had gone wrong, and who determined to revenge himself upon mankind in general, taking his life in his hands, and willing to accept the gallows as a just punishment, when he could no longer avoid it.

"It matters little, senor, who I am; but I come from one who sends you this letter," replied Seawaif.

El Moro took the letter and telling the lad to follow him, descended to the cabin.

It looked more like an old curiosity shop than a cabin, for, excepting a berth on one side where the pirate slept, a table used to eat on, and also to serve duty as well as a writing-desk, and two chairs, all the rest visible consisted of booty of every description, taken from the numerous prizes which had fallen into the clutches of the chief.

Motioning the lad to a chair, the pirate leader sat down in the other one, drawing it up to the table, and opening the letter read it aloud.

"Well, sir, this is a strange communication to send to me, claiming the rights which our Secret Signet bestows upon the holder, after he has driven me off from the deck of a prize, then a second time taken her from me, and pursued me into my very stronghold," said El Moro savagely, turning his fierce eyes upon Seawaif.

"You seem to overlook the fact, commodore, that my captain first had the prize as his own, and that you attempted to take it from him," Seawaif remarked.

"So he says; but I have watched for an opportunity to capture Don Maceo Gonzalvo for a year past, and when I knew that he had gone to Vera Cruz in his *carrera* I laid in wait for his return, for I was well aware that he had gone there to fit his daughter out for her marriage with Captain Luis Rosal, a foe of mine.

"And more, I knew that Captain Rosal was along, that costly wedding presents had been bought, and that these would fall to me, not to speak of the ransom of the Don, which I would have made heavy, and the pleasure of my revenge over Captain Rosal, whom I intended to hang."

"And the lady, sir?" asked Seawaif fearlessly.

"Oh, yes! I intended to enrich myself by her ransom, and, if the Don would not pay it, for it would beggar him, to make her my wife."

"Thank God my captain thwarted you, then, for it would have broken her heart," was the daring remark of the lad.

El Moro gazed at him in utter amazement, for Seawaif was indeed bearding the lion in his den.

"Well, if your captain has been your teacher, I do not wonder at the manner in which he has thwarted me," he said.

"My captain has been my teacher, for he is the only friend I have on the sea."

"On the sea! but the land?"

"I have no friend on the land, senor," was the reply.

"Well, you are cut out for one who will make himself heard upon the sea, I'll warrant, my lad; but how is it that your captain claims this Gonzalvo prize, I pray you tell me?"

"He had determined upon seizing the *carrera*, from her sailing out of Vera Cruz, and ran ahead to be near her on her run down the coast.

"When the *carrera* was becalmed, we were lying in an inlet near—"

"When did you go into the inlet?"

"The night before."

"My lookouts did not report that to me."

"That was not my captain's fault, senor."

"Well, sir?"

"We saw your boats going out to the attack, and so followed you."

"Why did you not warn me that you carried the Crimson Hands flag?"

"We knew not that you belonged to the Lagoon League, senor, for there are many outlaw crafts along this coast who do not."

"True; but flying the Crimson Hands flag is not the only requisite in making the demand that you do."

"No, senor, there is a Secret Signet."

"Have you it?"

"I have, senor," and the lad held forth his hand, which contained a huge seal ring, the stone being of blue, and in the center was set in the design, in small rubies, of two clasped hands.

On the outside of the ring were engraven the words:

"The Secret Signet of the Crimson Hands Flag! Respect it!"

"I cannot refuse to obey the Secret Signet, my lad, and your captain is at liberty to go his way in peace, though it is a disappointment to me, I

confess, as I had my eye on your beautiful craft.

"Next time we meet, I hope your leader will not hoist false colors, but sail under the flag he owns, so there will be no mistake."

"I shall tell him what you say, senor."

"Do so, and may I ask you why he did not come on board to me?"

"He was wounded, senor."

"Ah! not seriously I hope?"

"No, senor."

"And the name of your vessel, my lad?"

"The Sea Cat, senor."

"Your captain signs himself Achille Murtagh?"

"Yes, senor."

"He is a new man at sea."

"Under the Crimson Hands, yes, senor."

"I trust we shall meet some time; but tell him that El Moro sends him greeting, and places the Lagoon retreats at his service, either to repair ship, rest, or store booty."

"In the name of Captain Murtagh, I thank you, Senor Commodore," and Seawaif arose to depart.

"Stay, my lad! Do you anticipate remaining with Captain Murtagh?"

"I do, senor."

"Should he be slain, or aught happen to him, come to me, for I like you, and I will make you my aide."

"Here, this ring was made for the hand of a woman, one who died with it on, and it will just fit your finger."

"I loved that woman, my lad, and my giving you this ring proves how highly I regard you, although we have but now met."

"Wear it, and what you ask in its name I will grant."

The corsair commodore slipped upon the finger of Seawaif, as he spoke, a ring, the exact counterpart of the one which he had brought from Captain Murtagh as the Secret Signet.

"I thank you, Senor Commodore, and I will not forget your goodness," responded Seawaif, and bidding El Moro farewell the lad returned to his gig, which pulled swiftly back to the schooner.

As he touched the deck he stepped to the hal-yards and dipped the Crimson Hands Flag three times, at the same time, as the captain was in his cabin, issuing orders to set sail upon the schooner and head seaward.

The crew saw that the salute with the flag was returned from the pirate vessels, and, as the Sea Cat headed seaward without having to battle against such odds, they broke forth in ringing cheers for their captain and the lad, who had in some mysterious way extricated them from their peril.

CHAPTER XI.

SAFE IN PORT.

"WELL, Seawaif, you found that the Crimson Hands acted as a talisman with the corsair commodore?" said Captain Murtagh, addressing the lad as he entered his cabin, after starting the schooner seaward.

"I did, sir; and more—he gave me this ring, which bears, as you see, the emblem he so respects," and Seawaif held forth his hand.

"Yes, it is a *fac-simile* of my ring, and was made for so small a hand, that it fits yours."

"It was made for a woman, senor—one whom the chief told me he had loved, and who died with it upon her finger."

"Why he gave it to me I do not know, but he told me that any favor I asked in the name of this Secret Signet he would grant."

"See! there is a name within it—that of Gertrude."

"Gertrude!" and Captain Murtagh sprung to his feet and paced the floor, his face white, his brow clouded, and his lips compressed.

"Gertrude is the name of her he once loved."

"How passing strange, for I, too, loved a Gertrude, and it was that love that—Bah! I must not dream of that hellish past, or I shall go mad," and passing his hand rapidly across his face several times, he seemed thereby to drive from it every sign of sorrow and passion, while he said in his quiet way:

"Well, my boy, El Moro gave you the ring, because you pleased him, and you must ever wear it, for in this life no one knows but that some day you may have to seek his aid."

"But how found you the chief, in good or ill-humor?"

"He was disappointed at not being able to have your schooner as a prize, senor; but he respected the Signet, though he seemed surprised to know that you possessed one."

"Doubtless; I knew that it would surprise him," dryly said the young captain, and then he added:

"El Moro will yet receive greater surprises than this; but did he ask regarding me?"

"He wondered why you had not gone on board of his vessel."

"What reason did you give him?"

"I took advantage of the fact that you had received a slight wound, and so told him that you were wounded."

"You have your wits always about you, Seawaif, and some day I predict that you will make a great commodore."

"So said the corsair commodore, senor," modestly replied Seawaif.

"I can well believe him; but I note that the schooner is under way?"

"Yes, senor, I ordered her seaward at once, as I deemed that you so wished, after I had seen El Moro."

"You did right, my lad, and, after we have dropped the land an hour astern, I will head along the coast, as I fear me, the *carrera* of Don Gonzalvo is not yet out of danger, and I would protect her to haven."

"Yes, senor, for it would be a fearful thing for the fair lady on the *carrera* to fall into the hands of another of El Moro's vessels."

"Yes, or into the power of other pirates, Seawaif, for the Gulf is full of outlaws now it seems, especially along the coasts from Vera Cruz to the Balize; but I was told by a spy whom I have in Vera Cruz, that the Mexican Government is fitting out a brig-of-war, built in America, for the especial service of pirate hunting, and her commander is to be a senor whom I met last night on the *carrera*, one Captain Luis Rosal, a gallant officer withal, a good sailor and a gentleman, but one whose insane jealousy will lead him, I fear, to devote most of his time to hunting me down, as he deems that he has cause of quarrel with me, Seawaif; and in faith he may be right, if I sight those beautiful eyes of his lady-love once more, for they shot darts into the very depths of my heart."

"But you, my lad, are yet too young to know what love is, and—would to God I never had," and the last words were uttered in a voice of touching sadness.

"Senor, how do women cause so much unhappiness in this world, when to me they seem all that is beautiful and good?" asked Seawaif, innocently.

"My poor boy, picked up a waif at sea as you were, and only meeting a few beautiful unfortunates, you deem all alike in the world, for you know them not as many of them are—false at heart, coquettes, winning a man's love to trample it beneath their feet," and the young captain, seemingly deeply moved by some memories of the past, paced the cabin with dark face and eyes that appeared to look backward in some scene that brought only anguish to his soul.

And on the schooner sped, until it ran into the little port near the home of Conzalvo.

The *carrera* lay there at anchor, with Chico and a few of his crew on board, and, hailed to come on board the schooner, he told Captain Murtagh that they had reached port without further adventure, and Don Gonzalvo and the Senorita Amabel had gone on to the estate, while Captain Luis Rosal had remained in the village, as he had received word that his brig-of-war was to join him there.

Chico further stated that the Senorita Amabel had expressed the deepest gratitude at the noble self-sacrifice of the Cartagenian captain, and anxiety regarding his fate, after they had boldly seen him chase the pirate right into his retreat, and heard the hot firing that followed, proving that other vessels than the craft of El Moro had attacked him.

"It was a miracle how you escaped, Senor Captain, and the Virgin be praised that you did," he added.

"You say that Captain Rosal is ashore, Chico?" asked Captain Murtagh.

"Yes, Senor Captain, but he will hardly be glad to see you, as he looks upon you as a rival."

"Indeed! he honors me; but I cannot allow the captain's being in port to prevent me from landing."

"Come, Seawaif, suppose we take a stroll ashore and see the little hamlet," and half an hour after Captain Achille Murtagh and Seawaif entered the little tavern, which was the most pretentious structure in the wretched little port.

As they did so their eyes fell upon Captain Rosal, and a Mexican officer in the uniform of a Lancero, seated at a table near engaged in drinking a bottle of wine and talking earnestly together.

CHAPTER XII.
THE INSULT.

CAPTAIN LUIS ROSAL had not gone on to the ranch of Don Gonzalvo for two reasons, when he arrived in the little port.

The first was that he knew it was expected by the neighbors of the Don that he was to marry the Senorita Amabel upon their return, and he did not desire that the maiden should simply say she would not do so, thus breaking the compact.

The second reason was that he found there a letter awaiting him, brought by the servants from the Don's ranch, telling him that his brig would be sent to the port to meet him, and the Government ordered that he put at once to sea in search of the pirates, who were becoming most troublesome along the entire coast.

Captain Rosal was well aware that it might be a couple of days before his vessel arrived, and that time he could have spent at the elegant home of the Don; but the coldness of Amabel toward him caused him to wish to remain away from her, and so he bade her farewell as she mounted her horse to return home.

There was also in the mind of Luis Rosal a desire to board his brig immediately upon her arrival and stand up the coast in the hopes of catching Captain Murtagh, for somehow he had the thought that the Cartagenian cruiser had escaped the trap laid for it by El Moro, and he determined that he would put Captain Murtagh upon the basis of a pirate and so attack him, for the schooner would certainly prove no match for his brig.

Remaining therefore at the port, though taking up his quarters at the tavern, Captain Rosal had gone to the ranch of a friend of his who lived a mile away, well knowing that he would be a welcome guest.

This ranchero was a young man who had been the rival of Luis Rosal two years before for the hand of a lovely maiden, and the naval officer had won her love, and a duel was talked of between them when the sailor should return from a cruise; but this was nipped in the bud by the death of the fair girl, and this sad occurrence seemed rather to cement the friendship of the rivals, for they never referred to their enmity again.

The young ranchero was also a soldier, but, as his company was at the fort of the small town, he managed to spend most of his time upon his ranch, living a life of idleness, and leaving his lieutenant in command of his Lanceros, who were nothing more than a nominal support to the little fort that guarded the entrance to the little hamlet harbor.

The two captains, Luis Rosal of the Mexican navy, and Leon Riveras, the Lancero, were enjoying a bottle of wine when Captain Achille Murtagh accompanied by Seawaif entered the tavern.

They caught sight of the handsome commander of the Sea Cat, at the same moment that his eyes fell upon Captain Rosal, and the face of the latter turned white with rage, and then his eyes flashed with triumph.

"Riveras," he said, fairly hissing his words between his teeth:

"Did you ever see that man before?"

"No! but what a splendid-looking fellow he

"See, he smiles and bows to you.

"Who is he?" answered the Lancero.

Luis Rosal did not return the smile and bow of Achille Murtagh, and the American passed on to a table and took a seat, Seawaif taking his position opposite to him.

"He claims to be a Cartagena captain, and if he is, he is nothing more than a pirate, as all the cruisers of that country are."

"He looks American."

"He is an American, so he says, and he is the man whom I told you saved Don Gonzalvo's *carrera* from capture by El Moro."

"Then let us have him join us in a bottle of wine, along with that handsome lad, who wears an officer's uniform, young as he is."

"Introduce me, Rosal, and I'll have him as my guest."

"No, Riveras, for you do not understand the situation," said Luis Rosal.

"Ah! explain it then, please."

"That fellow had the impudence to issue commands upon the *carrera's* deck, where I acted as commander, and, when I resented his act, he insulted me."

"I resented the insult promptly, and sprung upon him with my sword, when, in some way he disarmed me."

"No! And you the best swordsman in Mexico?"

"Well, I could not understand it, other than

that I was too confident, and he struck my blade from my hand before I knew his strength."

"I am surprised at this, for I well know your skill, Rosal."

"He then tried to flirt with the Senorita Amabel, and so we quarreled, I telling him that we should meet again."

"And you have," said Leon Riveras, anxious to break the monotony of life by a duel, if he could fan a quarrel into a flame.

"Yes, we have met, and I shall force him to meet me in the *duello*."

"He does not look like a man who would require much forcing, Rosal."

"If he does, he belies his looks."

"Oh, he is brave enough, I know; but I am confident, when I am aware that I have a dangerous man to meet, I can defeat him, and if I do I shall kill him."

"You are right, for he doubtless runs into our port to follow up his acquaintance with the Gonzalvos."

"That is just why he is here, I'll wager my inheritance on it."

"And he is too fine looking and dashing a fellow to permit to be your rival, so you intend to meet him," urged Leon Riveras.

"Just that."

"But how can you arrange it, for he is a foreign officer in our port?"

"True; but he can understand an insult."

"How given?"

"I will show you," and calling for a quill-pen and paper, Captain Rosal wrote a few lines hurriedly and handed them to the Lancero to read.

The lines were:

"As I see that Captain Achille Murtagh, the Cartagenian rover, has come into this port, immediately in my wake, I can only understand by his having done so that he is here to make his threat good that he would again meet

"LUIS ROSAL,
"Captain Mexican Navy."

"That is plain enough, Rosal."

"I mean it to be," and calling to a peon servant the Mexican said:

"Hand this to that officer at yonder table."

The peon did so, and Achille Murtagh looked up, smiled, read the lines without the slightest change of countenance, and then addressed a few words to Seawaif, who arose and approached the table where the two Mexicans sat.

"He sends the lad to reply," whispered the Lancero.

"Senors," said Seawaif, bowing, "may I ask which of you is Captain Luis Rosal?"

"I answer to that name, my boy," said the Mexican naval officer.

"Ah! with your appearance, and the rank you hold, one would suppose you to be a gentleman, which your written insult sent by a servant disproves; but my chief waives your ignorance and ill-breeding, and accepts the insult, requesting me to state to you that he is wholly at your service."

The two Mexicans were utterly amazed at the cool delivery of these words, by a mere boy, and in the purest Spanish, and they sat gazing at him as though they had not fully comprehended him.

But Seawaif, having delivered his message, and in a way that threw an insult pat in the face of Luis Rosal, turned upon his heel and walked back to where his captain sat awaiting him, the servant having just brought in the supper the two had ordered, for a meal away from shipboard was then, as now, most enjoyable.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE CHALLENGE.

"WELL, Captain Rosal, your insult was received in a manner that throws it upon you to act now."

"Sainted padres! but that boy officer, for he wears a rank, I notice, fairly took my breath away with the words he threw at you," and Captain Leon Riveras laughed lightly at the remembrance.

Luis Rosal, however, scowled darkly, and muttered:

"I shall punish the boy as well as his master; but what am I to do now?"

"I see but one thing that you can do."

"Well?"

"Honor me by making me your second."

"That I intended to ask of you; but then?"

"You began the quarrel and you got your answer, so it remains for you to send a challenge."

"That gives him the choice of weapons."

"True, but what do you care for that, when you handle a blade as I know no man can do, and can shoot with the deadliest aim?"

"True, but I would have chosen pistols."

"Blades or pistols, both are alike deadly in your hands."

"Well, if you will be good enough, say to the Senor Cartagenian that I consider myself aggrieved by his conduct toward me, and, if he can write, demand a written apology from him for any intended offense?"

"I understand; but should he refuse?"

"Simply say that I demand a meeting at his earliest convenience at any place, and with any weapons which he may select."

"I will at once deliver your message, Rosal," and the young Lancero came and approaching the table where Captain Murtagh and Seawaif sat, just finishing their meal, he bowed with courtly grace and said:

"Permit me to ask if this is Captain Achille Murtagh of the Cartagenian navy?"

"My name is Achille Murtagh, senor," was the polite response of the seaman, as he arose to his feet politely.

"Allow me to present myself as Leon Riveras, a captain of Lanceros in the Mexican army, and introduce my reason for disturbing you by saying that I am the friend of Captain Luis Rosal."

"Indeed! I am surprised, senor, and I am glad that the person in question has gotten a gentleman to represent him," was the cool response, and Leon Riveras bowed and continued:

"With the nature of the quarrel between you and my friend, Captain Murtagh, I have nothing to do; but I have come to demand of you, for him, an apology in writing for your offense against him."

"My dear senor, I have no quarrel with your friend, I assure you."

"We met under circumstances which I supposed he would be thankful to me for, but feeling to the contrary, he disputed my right to act as I did, and I resented it."

"The result was that he crossed swords with me, and I disarmed him."

"I saw then that he wished to push the matter, and if he does, I have nothing more to say upon the subject."

"You refuse an apology, then, senor?"

"Senor Lancero Captain, if you again ask me to apologize, I shall believe that you too wish to insult me."

"As you please, senor; but at present my duty is to ask you to name your place and weapons for a meeting with my friend, and your earliest convenience will please Captain Rosal and myself too."

"I came into port, senor, to see if Don Gonzalvo's *carrera* had safely run the gantlet of all foes, and having nothing to detain me here, I may as well state to you that if you are not adverse to a moonlight meeting, as it is now growing dark, I will be at any place you may appoint within two hours from the present time."

"That will suit us, senor, and the place will be at an old ruined fort just half a mile down the shore, for it is a secluded spot, and we will not be troubled with lookers-on."

Captain Murtagh bowed, and said:

"The rendezvous will suit us, Seawaif, will it not?"

"Yes, senor."

"And your choice of weapons, Senor Captain?"

"Ah, yes! permit me to present my young friend and junior lieutenant, Senor Seawaif, who will arrange with you for any weapons you wish to have Captain Rosal use."

"Cool that, very," muttered Leon Riveras, and he bowed to Seawaif, who returned it coldly, and said with the utmost indifference:

"As Captain Rosal has already been disarmed by Captain Murtagh, senor, perhaps I had better select pistols as giving him a better chance."

Leon Riveras could hardly restrain his astonishment at the cool manner in which the youth gave Captain Rosal the choice of weapons.

It certainly showed perfect confidence in the prowess of his commander, and a strange light flashed over the face of the young Lancero.

"I will say pistols, and as the gentlemen both wear their swords, they can be used if desired, or needed."

"We will be on time, senor," said Seawaif, with a bow that plainly terminated the interview, and Captain Riveras took the silent hint given by the precocious lad and returned to his companion, who had been calmly observing the scene between his second and the sailors.

"Well, Riveras?" he said as the Lancero returned.

"The challenge was given and accepted, the lad is his second, we meet at the old Spanish fort on the beach, and the weapons are a mat-

ter of utter indifference, but pistols preferred, as having disarmed you once, the youth said, Captain Murtagh would be on more equal terms with fire-arms."

"They are cool about it at least."

"They are the coolest pair I ever saw, and your hand and your eye must not fail you, Rosal, or you are a dead man certain," was the significant response of the Lancero captain, and the two arose and left the tavern, the face of the sailor dark and stern, that of the soldier wearing an expression that it was hard to fathom, but which the reader will yet understand the cause of.

CHAPTER XIV.

A PEON SPY.

As the two Mexican officers left the tavern, Seawaif hastily arose, and, excusing himself to his chief, went out into the little street.

A peon was there, seemingly waiting for something to turn up for his benefit, and the lad called to him to approach.

"Do you see those two officers?" he asked, as the Mexicans were walking down the street of the little hamlet.

"Yes, senor."

"Here is a golden *onza* for you, and if you wish to get its mate, bring me news of where they go and what they do."

"Yes, senor; but where will I find you?" said the peon, delighted at having made an *onza* already, and the prospect of receiving another with such little work to do.

"You will find me here."

"Yes, senor; but you do not wish me to use my knife?" was the cool query of the peon.

"No, my man, I would strike at no man's back."

"Simply find out just what their plans are for to-night, and let me know."

The peon darted away and Seawaif returned to where he had left his captain, but made no report of what he had done.

"You will go on board the vessel, sir, before we start for the meeting place?" he asked.

"No, there is nothing to call me there, and I can send the coxswain after my weapons."

"I will go, senor, while you smoke your cigar, for I wish to go out to the schooner anyhow," remarked the lad, and a few moments after he went down to the landing, where they had left the boat, and calling up the men, from a sailors' inn near, he rowed out to the schooner.

Calling to Lieutenant Salvator, he held a few minutes' earnest conversation with him, and then, getting Captain Murtagh's pistol-case and a pair of superb swords from the cabin, he returned to the shore.

As he was about to enter the tavern, the peon approached him and beckoned to him to follow him into the shadow of a wall near.

For some moments he stood there, talking earnestly with the man, and then alone entered the tavern.

He saw his chief seated where he had left him, and quietly smoking; but he was not alone.

Captain Leon Riveras was with him.

"Well, Seawaif, you are back again, and Captain Riveras was waiting to see you, for, as I told him I was in your hands, I cared not to hear what he had to say," said Captain Murtagh pleasantly.

"Yes, senor, I waited to see you, to say that my friend, Captain Rosal, wishes the meeting to be private, and so will walk to the scene of meeting, and begs that Captain Murtagh and yourself will do the same, and not go in your boat, as you doubtless anticipated doing."

"Yes, we certainly expected to go in the boat; but will yield to your wishes, though I shall have to get a peon to show us the spot," answered Seawaif.

"Oh, no, for you cannot miss it, if you take the coast road, for it leads right to the old ruin."

"In regard to a surgeon, had you thought of any, senor?"

"I can bring my company surgeon."

"He will be sufficient, then, senor; but should one of the principals be wounded or killed we would wish some way to bring him back here."

"I have thought of that, senor, by ordering a vehicle held in readiness near by, to await a call."

"Then no other arrangements are necessary, since you have been so kind," said Seawaif, and his bow again dismissed Captain Riveras, who departed from the tavern.

Again did Seawaif go outside and calling his peon spy, he hastily wrote something upon a slip of paper, and the man bounded away, for he saw another golden *onza* in view, as he muttered:

"The young senor pays like a king for my

services, and three *onzas* of gold will keep me for the year in *aguadiente* and food.

"Juan Lerdo, you are in great fortune this night."

Returning to the tap-room, Seawaif rejoined Captain Murtagh, and the two sat chatting pleasantly together until presently a face peered into the window within reach of the lad's hand.

He nodded slightly, and the face disappeared, the young captain not seeing it, as he sat with his back in that direction.

"Senor, I guess it is time for us to start, for the moon is rising," said Seawaif.

"Yes, we do not wish to make Captain Rosal impatient by being late; but where are the weapons?" and Captain Murtagh arose.

"They are here, senor, and I have engaged a peon to carry them, after which we can dismiss him."

"It was arranged that no one should be there but ourselves, Seawaif."

"Yes, senor; but the peon will offset their surgeon, you know."

"I am in your hands, my brave boy, and let me say that you have conducted this affair splendidly."

"I should, senor, as you know that I have had practice in your behalf before," was the significant answer.

"True; but there was no mercy in my heart for that wretch, who was nothing more than an assassin, and there is for this jealous fool, Rosal."

"He insulted you, senor, as I understand it, from the first."

"Very true; but he is affianced to a most beautiful girl, to whose heart I would not bring sorrow."

"You must protect your own life, senor."

"Oh, I'll do that, never fear, my good lad," and the two left the tavern, the same peon, at the lad's command, picking up the pistol-case and swords and trudging on ahead in the capacity of guide as well as arms-bearer.

As they left the tavern the moon was above the horizon, and its light illumined their way to the old ruin, which had been set as the scene of the *duello*.

CHAPTER XV.

THE DUEL BY MOONLIGHT.

THE scene of rendezvous appointed by Captain Riveras was an old ruin, once known as a Spanish fort.

The entrance to the harbor had been changed by the shifting sands years before, and thus the fortification became useless, and another was built in its stead, and it slowly crumbled to ruin.

A few of the guns had been left, and the carriages had rotted away, and desolation dwelt upon all.

Mesquite bushes grew here and there, the adobe huts of officers and men were crumbling away, and in the moonlight the spot seemed the very place for a secret and hostile meeting, such as had been appointed there.

In one corner of the fortifications, nearest the sea were a score of white crosses which marked the last resting-places of the dead, who had died at the fort, or who had been slain at their ports by the shots of some hostile cruiser.

Walking along the beach-road the peon led his two followers directly to the fort, and through a grass-grown embassage into the open space near the little cemetery.

Here he deposited the weapons upon a grave, and turned away, after a few words in a low tone addressed to Seawaif.

"Here, my man, put this in your pocket," said Captain Murtagh, and he handed him a golden *onza*, at the same time adding:

"Return to the old lightning-riven tree we passed some distance back, and wait there until you hear a shrill call, and then return, for we will want you to carry the weapons back again."

"Thank you, senor; you are most generous indeed to a poor devil," and the peon walked away, disappearing among the mesquite bushes not far distant.

"We are before them, lad," said Captain Murtagh.

"So it seems, senor; but I hear voices now," and soon after there came into view three forms.

"There they come, senor," and they evidently met the peon, for he disappeared in that direction," remarked Seawaif, as the three men came into the little inclosure.

One of the three carried a bundle in his arms, and this he laid down, while Captain Riveras bowed to the two Cartagenians and said:

"Good-evening, senores! I see that you are ahead of us; but I thought that there were to be none other than those referred to?"

"What have you reference to, Senor Captain?" asked Seawaif.

"We met a peon just now leaving the ruin."

"True, he brought our weapons, and we dismissed him, when we should have detained him as an offset to the third one of your party."

"This gentleman is our surgeon," said Captain Riveras hotly.

"And the peon was our servant," retorted Seawaif.

"Senores, we came here to fight, not to quarrel," calmly said Captain Murtagh in his deep tones, while Luis Rosal rejoined:

"Yes, Riveras, let us end this affair and quickly."

Captain Riveras bowed and said, addressing Seawaif:

"Pistols were the weapons agreed upon, I believe."

"No weapons were actually agreed upon, Senor Lancero; but, as the challenged party I have decided upon swords, and if these prove not fatal, then pistols can be resorted to."

"My principal has a pair of elegant Damascus blades, perfectly alike, and just thirty inches to the point, and you can take your choice of them," and Seawaif took up the weapons and held them out toward the Lanceros.

"They are beauties, senor; but Captain Rosal has his own sword, and one that has served him well upon other occasions of this kind."

"Let him use it then," said the youth.

"But it is three inches longer than those of your principal."

"It makes no difference, lad, let him use his sword and I will take mine," put in Captain Murtagh, and this calm confidence in himself did not please either of the Mexicans, for they saw that the Cartagenian was giving Captain Rosal the advantage in weapons.

The Mexican naval officer now threw aside his coat and hat, rolled up the sleeve of his right arm and acknowledged himself ready, while the surgeon opened his box of instruments and stood to one side awaiting a call upon his services.

"I am ready, lad," said Captain Murtagh, who still retained his coat and hat, and made no preparations other than to take his sword and try its temper by bending it into a hoop over his head.

"He disregards your skill, Rosal, because he once disarmed you; but watch him well, for my idea is that he has a strong arm and is a good hand with a blade," whispered Captain Riveras, as he placed the sword in the hand of his friend.

"I do not believe he is my equal by any means, but should he be, then we are prepared against the worst," was Captain Rosal's remark in an undertone.

"Gentlemen, take your stands, please," called out the lad, Seawaif, and Captain Murtagh and his adversary stepped toward each other.

"Let the combat begin, senores," cried the lad Seawaif, and the swords of the two combatants came together with a clash.

Luis Rosal showed that it was his intention to kill the Cartagenian at once, for he attacked him furiously; but Captain Murtagh acted wholly upon the defensive, met the assault with a calmness and skill that foiled his antagonist, and while the Mexican grew fierce in his passes and thrusts, the coolness of his enemy caused Leon Riveras to mutter with amazement:

"By the sun! but he is playing with the best swordsman in Mexico."

Hardly had the words left his lips before Achilles Murtagh began to slowly give back, and, as though tiring, he did not show the same skill; while, encouraged by the thought that he was wearing his enemy out, while he himself was perfectly fresh, Captain Rosal pressed him still harder.

"What! the Cartagenian gives ground!"

"He has the skill, but not the lasting powers, and Rosal will kill him, when I had hoped it would be the other way, that I might step in and win the fair Amabel Gonzalvo."

"But I am to be disappointed it seems, for Rosal is too good a swordsman for me to pick a quarrel with, even if she is a beauty and an heiress—ha! what does that mean?"

Such were the muttered words of Leon Riveras, and which told how he was plotting the death of Captain Rosal at the hands of Captain Murtagh.

But his last words were caused by seeing the Cartagenian suddenly drop the seemingly weary way of acting on the offensive, and quick as a flash become the assailant.

Captain Rosal was thrown off his guard by this, and in the very moment he had believed

victory in his grasp, was forced backward and had all that he could do to defend himself.

Then it was that the Mexicans both realized that the Cartagenian had simply been playing with his adversary, for his skill now displayed was marvelous, and after showing his adversary how completely he was his master with the sword, he suddenly caught his blade upon his own, and twisting it from his hand sent it flying twenty feet distant, where it came down point first and stuck quivering in the earthworks.

At that moment Luis Rosal believed that his time to die had come, and he felt a thrill of horror through his heart, and a cry was upon his lips, when Captain Murtagh said sternly:

"Captain Rosal, I give you your life, sir."

Then came the cry from the lips of Luis Rosal, as he shouted in a loud voice:

"Men, are you ready?"

"Ay, ay, sir!" came a chorus of voices, and dark forms were visible over the breastwork, while the moonlight glimmered upon the muskets they held ready to fire.

"Captain Murtagh, those men have you under their aim, so surrender, for you are my prisoner," cried Luis Rosal in a voice that rung with malicious triumph.

CHAPTER XVI.

AN UNEXPECTED CLIMAX.

WHEN Captain Murtagh heard the words of Luis Rosal, and beheld at the same moment, the half-dozen soldiers on the rampart, with their guns leveled at his heart, he saw that he had been entrapped by those whom he had trusted as officers and gentlemen.

To resist was to throw his life away, and this he well knew, so he stood calm and motionless, while he asked sternly:

"What does this treachery mean, senor?"

"It is not treachery, Captain Murtagh, to *entrap a pirate*," was the sneering response of the Mexican, who, with Leon Riveras and the surgeon, now held a pistol covering the Cartagenian.

"A pirate, senor?" asked Murtagh coolly.

"Yes, for I accuse you of being in league with El Moro, the corsair commodore, in fact you are one of his officers."

"Indeed! this is news to me, senor."

"You dare not deny that you refused to allow me to fire upon El Moro, when you recognized who it was that had attacked the *carrera* of Don Gonzalvo."

"You do not dare deny that you followed El Moro's craft into his retreat, where were other vessels, any one of them more than a match for your schooner and crew, and yet you escaped unharmed."

"That is true, senor."

"Yes, for a cruiser has come along the coast, and saw you surrounded by El Moro's fleet, and in communication with him."

"Knowing this, I determined to meet you in the duello, as I had agreed, and at the same time arrest you as a pirate."

"You have played a bold game, senor Rosal," said Captain Murtagh, in the same quiet way in which he had before spoken.

"That is not all, sir, as Captain Riveras can tell you, for the forts have been ordered to sink your vessel, if it attempts to get up sail, and within a couple of days my brig will be here to capture your schooner, and then you shall be strung up to the yard-arm as a pirate."

"It seems that you hold the winning cards just now, Captain Rosal, so I can but submit," said Achille Murtagh, and he turned his sword-hilt toward the Mexican, to surrender it, when the lad Seawaif stepped forward and cried out:

"Hold, senors! for be we pirates or not, I hold the winning cards and not you!"

"Ha! do you show your teeth, boy, where your chief submits?" cried Captain Rosal angrily, and he leveled his pistol at the lad, who answered in his cool way:

"Senor, I would not be such a fool as to show my teeth unless I knew that I could bite."

"The fact is, Captain Murtagh is in perfect ignorance of a little game I played against your treachery."

"You plotted to get Captain Murtagh in your power, and not only save yourself from injury thereby, but to make him a prisoner, and you were aided in your treachery by Captain Riveras, and it resulted in your having half a dozen soldiers sent here to hide and await your orders."

"Now, discovering that you were plotting, I did likewise, and since yourselves and your soldiers came to this old ruin, just forty gallant sailors have surrounded it, and you have been caught in your own trap."

"It is false!" cried Captain Riveras.

"He is trying to frighten us," said Captain Rosal.

"Senores, I am, as the lad says, ignorant of his plot; but from what I know of my Boy Lieutenant, I advise you not to be rash," came in the deep tones of the Cartagenian captain.

"Ho, Carlos! do you see any foe near?" called out Captain Riveras, addressing the sergeant, who stood with his five men upon the top of the ramparts.

"No, Senor Captain, there is no one near to dread," was the answer.

"Now, Sir Pirates, you see you cannot play that game, so surrender, or I give the order to have you shot in your tracks."

"Ready there, soldiers!" cried Captain Riveras.

"Ho, Sea Cats! show yourselves," shouted Seawaif, and his clear voice was heard afar off.

In response instantly came a cheer from the four points of the compass, and hurrying feet were heard, while Sergeant Carlos and his soldiers sprung hastily down from the rampart, into the little burying-plot, and the next instant the breastworks were darkened by many forms, and there came in Lieutenant Salvator's ringing voice:

"Ahoy, Senor Seawaif, we are here!"

A laugh broke from the lips of Achille Murtagh, as he said:

"Lad, I am proud of you, for you have given these gentlemen a climax they little anticipated."

Then turning to the Mexicans he continued:

"Senores, the tables are turned, and did I serve you right, I would carry you as prisoners on board of my vessel; but I will not return good for evil, though you, Captain Rosal, I shall keep as a hostage until I get out to sea, as I have no desire to run the gantlet of the forts to get my pretty craft knocked full of holes."

"Once I am at sea, you shall be set free; but I advise you, Captain Riveras, to go to the forts and warn them not to fire on me, as your friend shall have the most conspicuous place on deck until we drop your batteries a league astern."

"Senor Seawaif, I place Captain Rosal in your charge, and we will at once start for the schooner."

Luis Rosal was livid with passion; but he dared not resist, and so offered his sword to Captain Murtagh, who said simply:

"Keep your weapons, senor, for you are a hostage, not a prisoner."

"May I have a word with Captain Riveras?" asked the Mexican naval officer.

"Certainly, senor."

Stepping quickly to the side of his friend, Luis Rosal said in a low tone:

"Riveras, this is a nice trick that accursed boy has played upon us."

"It is, indeed, and I only wish I had a few boys like him."

"Curse him! but you heard Murtagh's words?"

"Yes."

"Then you will hasten to the forts and bid them not fire on the schooner, for they can knock her out of the water."

"If the new artillerymen can hit her, yes; but they are recruits, you know."

"Still I do not care to take the chances, so pray do as I ask."

"Certainly, Rosal, for I would not place you in harm's way, as you know, so will hasten to Major Durango, and tell him just what has occurred, while I will come off myself in a small craft after you."

"You are very kind, Riveras, and I will not forget you. *Adios*," and clasping the hand of the man he believed his friend, Captain Rosal turned away and said:

"I am ready, senor, to accompany you."

With a bow simply, Achille Murtagh led the way up the beach, where Seawaif had told him the boats were awaiting and his men followed with their hostage, while Leon Riveras and his soldiers hastened back to the little seaport.

CHAPTER XVII.

TO GET RID OF A RIVAL.

WHEN Captain Leon Riveras started on his way to the hamlet, he walked rapidly along ahead of his brother officer, the surgeon, and his men, and suddenly came upon a man who seemed desirous of hiding behind a mesquite tree.

"Ho, fellow, stand!" he called out sternly.

"Who are you?"

"A poor devil, senor, who made a piece of silver, to keep his family from starving, by taking some packages to the old ruin for two senores," and the peon stood in a position that was cringing in the extreme.

"Ah! I know you now as a hanger-on about the tavern."

"Well, do you wish to make a piece of gold?"

"Oh, senor!"

"Can you keep your tongue between your teeth?"

"As though I were dead, senor."

"Well, I wish you to bear a note for me to Major Durango, the commandante of the forts."

"Yes, Senor Captain."

"Mind you, I will write the note for you at the tavern and you are to start with it, but I am anxious that it should not reach him until after he has sunk a schooner, that is now in the harbor, and will attempt to run out."

"Yes, senor."

"You might reach the major dripping wet, tell him that you had been upset in your boat, in crossing the harbor, and hand him the note; but you must see that the schooner has either been sunk or has escaped."

"I understand, senor."

"Here is a silver *onza* for your work, and when you bring me word that the note was delivered, just as I wish it to be, you shall have an *onza* of gold."

"I will do all that you wish, generous senor," replied the peon, and he walked on to the tavern, where Captain Riveras wrote the note and handed it to him.

Then he departed upon his errand, muttering to himself:

"This is my night of good fortune, and when I have gotten the *onza* of gold, I will give this silver one to the *padre*, to pray away my sins."

As he reached the shore he saw, coming around a small point of land that jutted out into the harbor, three boats, rowing at a rapid stroke.

"They are the schooner's boats, but if the craft attempts to run out, the big guns of Major Durango will knock her to pieces."

"I guess this letter to the major tells him not to fire upon the schooner, but for some reason Captain Riveras wishes him to do so, and yet get the credit of having sent him word not to do so."

"Now I would hate to see that gallant youth, and handsome captain, who were so generous to me, killed by the fort's fire; but then Captain Riveras is to remain here, and he is the one I'll have to make my money out of in future, so I must obey him, yet I'll see what the letter says, as he thinks I cannot read, and hence sent it open, and it may tell me what hold I have on him."

Going up close to the swinging lamp of a wretched inn, he opened the letter and read as follows:

"MAJOR DURANGO, COMMANDANTE, ETC.:—"

"SENOR:—When I sent you word to keep your guns on the strange schooner in the harbor, and to sink her if she attempted to run out, as I had reason to believe her a pirate, I knew not that her commander would protect himself as he has done."

"At a meeting with Captain Rosal, he has made the latter prisoner, and carries him upon the deck of his vessel to prevent your firing upon him, and I beg of you to allow him to escape, rather than that poor Rosal should be slain."

"When we meet I will explain fully, but I hasten to send this by a trusty peon, that it may reach you in time, as I am detained here just now by an inland courier who has just arrived with dispatches for me."

With esteem,

"RIVERAS."

"Aha! he writes one thing, and bids me arrive too late, so I see that he wants Captain Luis Rosal killed."

"So be it, for I do too, as he once struck me with his sword, when I ran up against him accidentally, and I have not forgotten the blow."

"No, no, Juan Lerdo is not one to forget a blow, so for my own sake, Senor Riveras, I will be tardy with this note, and take your golden *onza* too, ay, and many more, as I hold your secret, for I am no fool, and can see you never forgave your friend for being your successful rival a year ago, and mean now to get him out of the way that you may win the Senorita Gonzalvo back in the hills."

"So! so! Juan Lerdo is no fool, no fool, and his wits will make you pay him well."

"Now to take a small boat and row over to the forts," and going to the shore the peon selected a small sea canoe and started on his way, paddling along with a most leisurely stroke.

He had gone but a short distance when he saw the boats reach the schooner, and with a rapidity that seemed like magic he beheld the sails set and the anchor gotten up.

"They work like lightning on board that craft," he muttered.

Hardly were the words out of his mouth, before a flash came from the fort's dark side, and a solid shot rushed shrieking across the bows of the schooner.

but the vessel did not heed the brazen command to halt, and glided on its way toward the pass leading out of the harbor.

Almost instantly, from the other fort came a shot and it passed directly over the head of the peon.

"Holy Mother! I am directly in range," he cried in alarm, and he began to swiftly paddle toward the fort where he knew Major Durango had his quarters, when from both fortifications the guns opened fiercely upon the schooner, and one shot striking the canoe it was shattered to atoms and Juan Lerdo was hurled into the water.

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE GANTLET OF FIRE.

CAPTAIN ROSAL certainly felt that he had gotten himself into a scrape; but he tried to make the best of it, and put on an air of indifference.

It however cut him to the quick to feel himself a prisoner, where he had expected to be captor.

He had determined to get rid of Achille Murtagh by foul means, if he could not by fair.

If he proved the better swordsman, and was able to run him through the heart, well and good, and, knowing his own skill, he did not doubt but that he could do this.

But then there was the chance that pistols might be used, and although he prided himself upon his deadly aim, he might meet his match in the Cartagenian, and he did not care to take the chances of doing so.

Therefore he said to Leon Riveras, when the two left the tavern together:

"Captain, I have reason to believe that Captain Murtagh is a rover, and not what he represents himself to be, so my idea is that we find out."

"I am willing, Rosal, so how will we go about it— Ah! here is a courier," and the young Lancero hailed a mounted soldier, who was riding rapidly by.

"Dispatches for you, senior."

"I was going to the inn to seek you," said the man.

The Lancero officer took the dispatches and read them, but as they have nothing to do with this story I will pass them by.

The courier then made known to the captain that he had seen an American schooner, flying the Cartagena flag, chase a pirate craft into an inlet and thereby run into a trap, as two other vessels came out of lagoons, and hemmed him in.

But the schooner hoisted the same flag the pirates were flying, and sending a boat aboard one of them, no more firing occurred, and the supposed Cartagena craft sailed out to sea unmolested.

Such was the courier's story; and hearing it, Luis Rosal cried excitedly:

"The schooner of Murtagh it was, and her commander is, as I believe, a pirate. Now, Riveras, we must capture that man."

"By all odds, Rosal; and I will order a sergeant and five men to go to the ruin and be there to support us."

"Yes; and if Murtagh selects pistols, they must interfere before the word to fire."

"Certainly, for you must not risk your life against his."

"By no means," and the two men passed on, while a crouching form, near by arose and walked rapidly away.

It was Juan Lerdo the peon, and his having overheard that which was said, was what put Seawaif on his guard, and enabled him to counterplot against the treachery of the Mexicans.

Thus it was that the Mexican officers arrived on the scene of the duel, prepared to capture Captain Murtagh as a pirate, and little dreamed that they would be so cleverly outwitted by a boy.

Having been thus caught in their own snare, Captain Riveras congratulated himself upon having so cleverly gotten out of the scrape, while his more unfortunate friend, Rosal, was taken on board the schooner, with every prospect of being killed and leaving the field clear to his retreating foe to win the hand of Amabel Gonzalvo.

When taken on board the schooner, Luis Rosal was taken aft by Seawaif and placed near the helmsman, while Captain Murtagh himself got sail on the vessel and Lieutenant Salvator called the men to quarters.

"Thanks to having me on board, senior, you will escape to sea," said Luis Rosal, when Captain Murtagh walked aft, and the schooner swung around to the wind.

"You think that your presence here is a guarantee then?" responded Achille Murtagh.

"Certainly, for Major Durango would never dare fire upon a vessel at the risk of killing me, for he would rather lose El Moro and his entire fleet of pirates."

Hardly had the words left his lips, when the flash of flame came from the fort, followed by the boom of the gun and the rush of the shot.

"Ah! your friend the major intends firing a salute in your honor," said Achille Murtagh sarcastically.

"I cannot understand it, for Riveras must certainly have sent word that I was a prisoner on board," answered Captain Rosal, as the firing now became rapid from both of the forts.

"You are a hostage, senior, not a prisoner; but as the former I find you of little value, for your friends fire in a way that would cause one to think they wished to get rid of you by a shot."

"See! that shot came near killing you, but if they fire no better than they are now doing, I do not care," and Captain Murtagh then called out:

"Ho, at the guns there!"

"Ay, ay, sir," rung out the officers in charge.

"Those gunners may improve with practice, so give an example of what you can do, lads."

"Ay, ay, sir," was the cheery chorus in reply, and a moment after the schooner reeled under the discharge of her guns.

Almost at once the firing from the forts ceased, for the shots of the schooner had been truly aimed, and doing considerable damage, had driven the gunners from their posts, almost in a panic.

But the officers rallied them, and again the forts opened fire, though not with much precision, while the gunners on board the schooner were skilled and cool, and seldom threw a shot awry.

"It looks as though we were going to run the gantlet of fire without much damage, senior, so that you are not in much danger from your friends after all," said Captain Murtagh to Luis Rosal.

"Oh, they cannot know that I am on board," said Captain Rosal.

"Perhaps they are missing the schooner purposely on your account, Captain Rosal, and merely firing to frighten us," said Seawaif with a little laugh.

"From their wretched aim it would seem so," growled Rosal, while Lieutenant Salvator remarked:

"I do not think you should complain of their marksmanship, senior, as if it was truer, your danger would be far greater— Oh! they are improving," and as Salvator spoke a shot tore through the bulwarks forward, killing one man and wounding two others.

"That shot came from that last gun to the left: return it, lads!" shouted Captain Murtagh, and, as he addressed no particular gunner, all whose pieces would bear upon the position were instantly aimed and fired.

"That gun is out of the fight," coolly said Captain Murtagh, who was watching the effect with his glass, and that he spoke truly was soon shown by no more shots coming from that point.

The schooner was now in her most perilous situation, and there would have been many chances against her, had the firing of the forts been better.

But Captain Murtagh knew that his vessel would be running very fast, under the ten-knot breeze, and that she was a hard target to hit under the circumstances, and even without Luis Rosal on board as a hostage, he would have run out.

He had boldly run into the port under a neutral flag, and had anticipated no danger in getting out; yet he was not a man to count the chances for and against him.

As the schooner got into the position where she would have to stand the hottest fire, Captain Murtagh called out:

"Lively at the guns there, men, for this is their last chance and their best at us," and then springing to the wheel, he grasped it firmly, and himself ran the rest of the gantlet out through the narrow pass.

"Senior Captain, even without your aid we have gotten through; but I shall release you as I promised."

"Being a sailor you can readily run back in the little boat I brought out for you."

"I can, sir."

"I will at once lay the schooner to then, and you are at liberty to depart."

"Pray present my compliments to the commandante of yonder forts and say to him that I

never saw worse aim than his gunners were guilty of, and yet I do not quarrel with them on that account, as it has saved my vessel many a hard knock, and a number of my crew from death."

"Seawaif, kindly have the schooner brought to; and Captain Rosal's boat gotten ready for him?"

"Adios, Senior Rosal, and should you happen to see Don Gonzalvo and the beautiful Senorita Amabel, kindly present my compliments to them," said Achille Murtagh, as Luis Rosal was going over the side.

"The Senorita Amabel, and Don Gonzalvo will consider it an insult to receive a message from a pirate," retorted Luis Rosal.

"Doubtless, but I send the compliments of myself, Achille Murtagh of the Cartagena navy," was the unruffled reply.

"And be you such as you say, I warn you never to visit this port again, or ever to cross my path at sea, for so surely will you be treated as a pirate if you do."

"I shall visit yonder port at my pleasure, senior, and if I cross your path at sea, you shall never see the stern of my schooner, even if you tread the deck of a line-of-battle-ship, I so pledge you my word."

"Now, Senior Rosal, permit me to bid you adios," and Captain Murtagh raised his hat, while the sailor holding the boat's painter cast it aboard, and the Mexican officer went dancing away landward in his little craft, while the Sea Cat stood swiftly out to sea, her crew rapidly repairing the little damage done her in running the gantlet of fire.

CHAPTER XIX.

AT GONZALVO RANCH.

CAPTAIN LUIS ROSAL was in anything but a good humor, when he headed his little sail-boat back to port.

Instead of being thankful for his escape, instead of feeling that he had been well treated by the man whom he accused of being a pirate, he was roused at what he had passed through, and he swore vengeance against Achille Murtagh as soon as he should get upon the deck of his vessel.

He could not understand how it was that Major Durango, the commandante, had fired upon the schooner, knowing him to be on board.

"Ah! there is a sail, and it is running out."

"It is a pilot boat," he said, as a small sloop was visible standing out of the channel between the forts.

As the course he was then on would bring him near the sloop, he held on his way and soon after came a hail in a voice he at once recognized:

"Ho, Rosal, ahoy!"

"Ay, ay, Riveras, is that you?" he answered.

"Yes, and out after you. I'll luff up and you come alongside and we'll tow your boat in."

The naval officer was seen on the sloop, and with the boat in tow it put back for port.

There were three men on the sloop besides Captain Riveras, he having chartered the craft to go out, as he said, to pick up his friend.

"What does this mean, Riveras, that the schooner was fired upon and I on board?" asked Luis Rosal in no pleasant humor.

"I am utterly at a loss to understand it, for I sent a trusty messenger with a note to Senior Durango, telling him the circumstances."

"We will stop at the water stairs and ask an explanation."

"Certainly, for if Durango has subjected me to this fire knowingly, I shall resent it."

"You are right, Rosal; but how hotly the fort opened."

"Yes, and threw their powder and iron away, for the schooner was very little hurt."

"I am glad for your sake that it was so."

"So am I; but here we are at the water stairs."

The sloop glided alongside of the stone stairs of the fort, and the two officers at once sought the quarters of the commandante.

They found him considerably excited, reading a letter, the paper being wet, while Juan Lerdo the peon, his clothes dripping, was standing near him.

"Ah! my dear Rosal, I rejoice to know that you escaped, and regret exceedingly that you were subjected to my fire; but Riveras's letter only just arrived, owing to his poor devil of a messenger finding some trouble in getting a boat, and then, it being sunk by a shot, having to swim ashore."

This explanation fully satisfied Captain Rosal, and each officer having remembered the peon

with a generous donation, accepted the invitation of the major to a supper and a bed for the night.

Returning to Captain Riveras's ranch the next morning, the two officers found there official letters awaiting them, and as his brig would not be in port for several days Captain Rosal said:

"I believe I will run up to the ranch of Don Gonzalvo for a couple of days, Riveras."

"It would be a good idea, and if agreeable, I should like to accompany you."

It was not agreeable, but Captain Rosal did not say so, and told a polite falsehood about his being delighted to have company.

So the two rivals, as in reality they were, started for Gonzalvo Ranch, and arriving there received a warm welcome from the Don, and from Amabel a somewhat cold one.

That night at supper the story of the midnight firing was told, while Leon Riveras, as if by accident, came out with the duello and the result.

Luis Rosal bit his lip viciously, at having Amabel know that the Cartagenian had proven his master with the sword for the second time; but Leon Riveras went on to say that "the pirate," as he called Achille Murtagh, was the finest swordsman he had ever seen, or heard of, though without doubt Captain Rosal would get his revenge at no distant day.

"In what manner, senor," asked Amabel quickly.

"When his brig-of-war arrives, for then he can hunt down the pirate and hang him to his yard-arm."

"You persist in calling Captain Murtagh a pirate, senor; have you other reason than that given for so believing him?" asked Amabel.

"Well no, senorita; but I consider that amply sufficient."

"If a pirate, he is also a gentleman, a brave man, one of refinement, and possessed of wonderful courage, we must admit, senor," said Don Gonzalvo.

"Granted, yet still a pirate, and as such deserving of the yard-arm, and I shall make it my business to hunt him down and hang him," remarked Captain Rosal.

"He is a dangerous foe, Senor Rosal, and you must beware that he does not hunt you to death," said Amabel with a smile that had something of a sneer in it.

"He may have proven my superior with a sword, senorita, but where my brig is almost double the size of his schooner, carries half as many more guns and twice his force of men, if he can defeat such odds I am willing to have him do so."

"He certainly was not beaten by El Moro's three vessels."

"Ah, because he was their ally—a fellow-pirate, senorita."

"Strange then, was it not, that he should have boarded our *carrera* and driven El Moro from our decks, and afterward chased the pirate into his lair?" Amabel said with a sneer.

"He was El Moro's ally for all that, I believe, and as a pirate I shall hunt him down and present to you, Don Gonzalvo, his schooner as a pleasure craft in place of your *carrera*, and then, with her speed, you need fear no foe in your coast cruises."

"I thank you, senor. I shall prize the schooner most highly, and Amabel will then not fear to take a voyage," said the Don.

"For myself, I will reserve my gratitude, Captain Rosal, until the schooner has been captured," almost wickedly said the maiden, and Leon Riveras laughed, while Captain Rosal winced under the shot.

Gonzalvo Hacienda was certainly a grand home, for there had dwelt the forefathers of the Don for several generations, and with ample wealth each one had added improvements, until no grander dwelling was there in Mexico.

The richest furniture, the coolest and largest rooms, the grandest halls, and in fact every luxury and comfort was found there that heart could desire.

Both officers looked covetously upon the grand domain, which would be the home of the one who became the husband of the beautiful Amabel.

Of course Luis Rosal was the acknowledged lover of the maiden, and she was pledged as his bride at no very distant day; but Leon Riveras did not despair on this account, for he argued that Amabel did not appear to be intensely smitten with his rival, and could he remove him from his path, then the field would be open to himself.

Such was the state of affairs at Gonzalvo Ranch, where two days after the two officers

bade farewell to the Don and Amabel, and set out for their return to the coast, for word had come that the brig-of-war Patrol had arrived.

CHAPTER XX.

THE BRIG AND THE SCHOONER.

WHEN Captain Luis Rosal and his companion, Leon Riveras, reached the little seaport, they found there the brig-of-war Patrol, which had come into the harbor the day before.

She certainly was a beautiful vessel, an agent of the Mexican Government having been sent to the United States to have her built, and that she possessed splendid sea-going qualities, as well as speed, the merest glance would show.

She was most thoroughly armed, and no commander could wish for a better equipped vessel, or one better manned.

Upon going on board of her the young Mexican was delighted, and mentally vowed that it should not be very long before the schooner of Captain Murtagh should strike her flag to his brig.

As soon as he could get off he did so, and the Patrol stood out of port, followed by the good wishes of the people, and hearty hope of the Mexican officers that she would make a name for herself.

Hardly had she dropped the forts astern, when a sail was sighted, rounding a point some two miles distant, and heading for the port, it seemed, to judge from her actions.

One glance at the stranger, and the cry of joy which Captain Rosal gave vent to amounted to almost a shout.

"It is the schooner! it is the pirate!" he cried.

"What schooner? What pirate, Senor Captain?" asked an officer, surprised at the excitement of his commander.

"The schooner whose commander claims to be in the Cartagenian service, and who held me as hostage on his craft while putting to sea the other night."

"I declare, this is far better luck than I anticipated, for I shall capture him in full sight of the forts and the town."

Then lowering his voice he said in a tone meant for his own ears alone:

"Amabel will hear the guns, and the news shall soon be sent to her that I have captured and hanged her pirate hero."

Calling out to his officers, Captain Rosal ordered the brig to be quickly put in fighting trim, and the men were sent to quarters.

In the mean time the schooner came bowling along at a lively pace.

The brig had evidently been sighted from her decks, yet no preparations were visible on board of a warlike character.

At her peak floated the flag of Cartagena, while the brig carried the Mexican colors.

That the townspeople and the soldiers at the fort had also seen the schooner was evident, as numbers were seen seeking elevated positions to view the combat which must certainly occur, and the gunners in the fortifications were ordered to their guns, to be ready for work, if they were needed, which they did not expect would be the case, as the Patrol could certainly capture the schooner without outside aid.

The schooner was now not half a league from the brig, sailing at a slapping pace, under the light wind she had, and heading on her course as though she had not sighted the brig, or was wholly indifferent to her presence.

"This indifference of Captain Murtagh seemed to greatly disturb the mind of Luis Rosal, who did not like the confidence shown by his enemy."

Still he could not for an instant doubt his power to easily whip his foe, and the Patrol went down to meet the Sea Cat with perfect confidence of all on board, and a surprise that the schooner should be so reckless as to meet an adversary so much her superior in size, men and guns.

But the Sea Cat came on, and her men were seen going quietly to quarters, and all being gotten ready for the combat.

As the brig fired a shot as a feeler, the schooner ran up the strange flag, that of the blue field and red hands, and a shout arose on the Patrol, for it seemed to proclaim the foe to be indeed a pirate.

Luffing up sharp the brig fired a broadside, but wearing around as she was, her shots flew astern of the schooner, which, while her adversary was in stays, put her helm quickly down and gave her the benefit of her port battery.

This fire was well delivered, and the result was that a dozen men on the brig went to the deck, killed or wounded, a gun was dismounted and other damage done which caused considerable excitement upon the Patrol.

While in temporary confusion, from the shock, the schooner, working like a piece of machinery delivered at the brig her other broadside, and followed it almost immediately with a third, and the result was terrible upon the enemy, who was badly crippled.

"My God! that man handles his craft as he does a sword, so we must get to close quarters," said Captain Luis Rosal, who saw that his own fire had done the schooner no damage.

Orders were given now to fire as they could upon the pirate, gun for gun, while the brig endeavored to work down upon her enemy and carry her by boarding.

But the schooner had gained the point in the fight which she wanted, and her guns were manned with the utmost coolness, rapidity and precision, and the damage done her large adversary was fearful, for dead and wounded were upon all sides, two guns lay dismounted and the bulwarks and rigging had suffered considerably, so that her crew began to waver.

Seeing the situation of affairs, Captain Luis Rosal grew almost desperate.

He saw that the combat was viewed from the shore, where were gathered all the townspeople, and at the forts, too far off to fire upon the schooner, the soldiers were grouped together anxiously watching the unequal conquest, and yet beholding the weaker vessel getting the better of the stronger.

Suddenly, as he turned his eyes landward, he caught sight of a party on horseback, gazing upon the scene from the old ruined fort.

A sweeping view through his glass told him who they were.

"My God! there are Don Gonzalvo, his daughter and their attendants!"

"They have ridden down to see the battle, and defeat almost stares me in the face."

"No, no, it shall not be, for, suffer as I may I shall carry the schooner by boarding."

The words came through his shut teeth, and then loud rung out his orders to bear down upon the schooner and carry her by boarding.

The crew did all they could to obey this order, for they saw that the schooner was getting the best of them as it was, and their superior numbers, at close quarters must be their only salvation.

So down toward the schooner the brig was headed, under all the canvas she dared spread.

Captain Rosal had hoped that Achille Murtagh would fly, when he saw his intention; but instead the schooner daringly headed for the brig, passing in a furious fire as she came, and which at last became so hot that the crew of the Patrol broke in confusion and ran from their guns.

Instantly the deep voice of Captain Murtagh was heard:

"Cease firing!"

Then as a lull followed he hailed:

"Ho, the brig-of-war!"

"Ahoy the schooner!" gruffly answered Luis Rosal.

"Do you surrender your vessel?"

"No!"

"Ay, ay, sir—fire!"

Again the schooner opened fire, the Patrol doing likewise, as her men had been forced to quarters by their officers, and the two vessels drew nearer and nearer, forming a grand and thrilling sight to those who viewed the scene from the land.

CHAPTER XX.

THE BOY LIEUTENANT'S PRIZE.

As the schooner and the brig neared each other, Luis Rosal called picked men about him to lead them as boarders upon the deck of his enemy.

He saw that, in spite of all that he had suffered, he still greatly outnumbered the foe in men, and could he once gain his decks, he did not doubt but that he could bodily drive them overboard into the sea.

To accomplish this he bent every energy to getting his best men about him as boarders, and the helmsman had orders to lay the Patrol alongside of the Sea Cat at the earliest moment.

The two vessels were now approaching each other in a manner that would bring the brig's bow against the schooner, slightly aft of amidships, when by luffing she could slide along the side of the Sea Cat, heading sternward, and her crew, pouring over her bows, as the grapnels were thrown, would force their foes forward in their own vessel.

This plan appeared to work well, up to an instant before the two vessels came together, when suddenly the schooner delivered a broadside of grape-shot, and putting her helm down hard, running round with a speed that was remarkable, right under the bows of the Patrol,

and the situation was instantly changed; for where the Mexicans were prepared to board the enemy upon his starboard quarter, his port-bow, by his quick and skillful movement was prevented, and a gun discharged with telling effect was followed by the pouring upon their decks of the Cartagenians.

Surprised, many of them swept down by the fire of the schooner, and attacked with an irresistible fury, the Mexicans were forced back by the Cartagenians, who soon broke in a panic and cried for quarter most lustily.

Instantly the carnage ceased, and Captain Rosal, trembling with rage, was confronted by Seawaif, the Boy Lieutenant:

"Ha! is your chief killed?" cried the Mexican officer with savage delight.

"No, senor; but I will take your sword, please," was the answer.

"Is he wounded?" grimly asked Rosal.

"Oh, no, senor."

"Then why do you demand my surrender, boy?"

"Because I fought the schooner, senor, with the kind permission of my good captain," was the quiet response.

"You! you fought that schooner?"

"Yes, senor."

"By direction of your chief?"

"No, senor. Captain Murtagh gave no advice; he was simply a looker-on, for I asked him to allow me to defeat you, that I might have my revenge."

"Your revenge?" and Luis Rosal gazed hard at the boy.

"Yes, senor, for I have not forgotten you, if you do fail to remember me."

"I have not forgotten that you married my poor sister Inez for her money, and then broke her heart by your cruelty, and now the riches you possess are hers, or rather mine, for she died and left me her written history of all you had done, and asked me to avenge her, and get back my fortune."

"That scar on your face I gave you, the night you chased us to the shore, and we put to sea in a little craft in the face of a storm."

"I was a boy then, of very few years, but I raised the pistol of one of our peons and fired, and it saved us from capture."

"You thought that we were lost in the storm that night, and you were happy; but it was not so, for I am here to avenge poor Inez."

"I was picked up at sea by Captain Murtagh, a waif on a wreck."

"My sister was dead, but the papers she left I kept, and only yesterday did I look over them and discover all that she had suffered, and they bade me avenge her."

"I have done so, in part, for Captain Murtagh knows all, and he allowed me to fight you, and defeat you."

"The gold you have is mine, and that I will force you to give up, and that will be one more stroke of revenge, while my last will be to prevent the Senorita Gonzalvo from becoming your wife."

"Your sword, please, Captain Luis Rosal."

The Mexican was perfectly livid, and his eyes glared upon the boy with a look that was as ferocious as a wolf.

He remembered him then, as the brother of a girl whose heart he had won, and he had made her his wife, and then persecuted her every moment of life to get rid of her.

He had driven her to fly from him, accompanied by her little brother, and, believing them lost, he had gotten their wealth.

Now the boy had turned up to take from him that wealth.

He had appeared, as from a grave in the sea, to defeat him in a combat, and to take from him his ill-gotten gold, while worse still, he said he would prevent his marrying the Senorita Gonzalvo.

The two stood together upon the quarter-deck of the brig, whither Luis Rosal had walked after he saw that all was lost.

What had passed between them no one heard, for Seawaif had spoken in a low, but earnest tone.

He saw that the boy meant all that he said, and strategy alone could prevent him carrying out his determination.

So he said in husky tones:

"Quintas Alfeno, my brave boy, I confess that I wronged your good sister and you too; but bitterly have I repented, and if you will give me a few weeks' time I will restore to you your fortune."

"You have had your revenge in defeating me, and I beg you do not make known to the public what I have done, for it is shame enough to know that you have been the victor."

"Captain Rosal, I should show you no mercy; but I will not make known to your Government your crime toward me unless you refuse to give up my fortune."

"Now hand me your sword, senor, for I see Captain Murtagh is growing impatient."

With a muttered curse the Mexican handed over his weapon, and just then Captain Murtagh boarded the brig.

"Senor Captain, my Boy Lieutenant having captured your vessel, he shall command her until he carries her under the guns of the fort, and surrenders her to Major Durango the commandante."

"To him I wish Lieutenant Seawaif to explain that I am no pirate, and that you had no right to attack me as such."

"Having taught you a lesson, I shall prove my honesty by returning your vessel to the Mexican Government, with a request that more discriminating officers be placed in command and who will not attack the craft of a country with which they are not at war."

"With the quarrel between Lieutenant Seawaif and yourself I have nothing to do; but I know all, and should he not return in safety, at his pleasure, after delivering up your brig to the commandante, I shall know that you are the one who keeps him, and I shall land and place all the papers, referring to your guilt, in the hands of your Government."

Then turning to Seawaif Captain Murtagh continued:

"My lad, you will find me cruising off and on before the port, when you wish to come out."

"Now take command of the brig, and I will give you a prize crew of eight men, for they will be sufficient."

A few moments after the two vessels swung apart, the crippled brig heading slowly for port, while the schooner, with her crew rapidly repairing damages, headed along the coast, little over a league distant from the shore.

CHAPTER XXII.

THE SURRENDER.

SEAWAIF made no effort to repair damages on board the brig, nor would he permit the men to throw the dead into the sea, though he had the wounded cared for at once.

He determined to surrender the brig just as she was, and let the commandante see just what havoc had been done by Captain Rosal's foolish attack upon a vessel that was flying a flag with which Mexico was at peace.

Those at the fort saw the battle end, as did the groups of people ashore; but they observed that the Mexican flag was still left flying, and that the schooner headed away alone, after the battle, and the Patrol started for port.

This they could not understand, and in breathless expectation they awaited the coming of the brig.

Slowly she came, her rigging cut, her sails torn, her bulwarks and decks splintered, her spars scarred, and dead and wounded lying from quarter-deck to fore-castle, while three of her guns were dismounted, and altogether she presented a most complete picture of destruction, sorrow and suffering.

Entering the port, Seawaif, who stood at the helm, luffed up near the water-stairs of the fort and dispatched a young officer to ask Commandante Durango to kindly come on board.

This Major Durango soon did, accompanied by his staff.

Seawaif met him at the gangway, saluted politely, and led him aft, where Captain Luis Rosal stood morosely awaiting their arrival.

"*Madre de Dios!* what a scene of carnage! A sea battle is far worse than one on land," cried the Mexican major, as he stepped on deck.

Then, as he approached Captain Rosal, he said:

"Well, Rosal, what is the meaning of this?"

"Simply, Major Durango, that I met more than my match in the schooner, and had to strike my flag to him," was the sullen response.

"You caught a Tartar when you certainly had a right to expect an easy victory, with everything in your favor. But your flag still flies."

"Let that youth explain," and Luis Rosal nodded toward Seawaif, who said, in his quiet way:

"Senor Commandante, I am directed by Captain Achille Murtagh, of the Cartagenian service, to say that as Captain Rosal insisted upon attacking him as a pirate, although he had told

him who and what he was, he was forced to punish him severely, and now proves his good faith by turning over to you the brig, from whose peak the Mexican flag was not lowered, with the hope that you will request Captain Rosal to be less hasty in future."

"My Jupiter!" have you made such a gross mistake, Rosal?

"This will cause us trouble," anxiously said Major Durango, while Captain Leon Riveras, who had accompanied him on board the brig, looked upon his rival with amazement.

"No, Senor Commandante, Captain Murtagh does not intend to report the matter to his Government; but he hopes that Captain Rosal will be more particular in future," said Seawaif.

"And what vessel is it, young senor, that your gallant captain commands?"

"The Cartagenian schooner-of-war Sea Cat, senor."

"And yet he exchanged fire with my forts, in running out the other night."

"True, senor, for he was compelled to return your fire, and he knew that it was decided that he was a pirate, and should be treated as such, and when Captain Murtagh makes up his mind to do anything, he carries it out if it is in the power of man to do so."

"I can well believe that, young senor, and Captain Rosal will doubtless agree with me; but may I ask who you are?"

"A lieutenant on the schooner, Senor Commandante."

"Well, you talk like one who can uphold your rank, young as you are; but is there anything that I can do for you, or your captain?"

"No, senor, thank you."

"Will he not come into port?"

"No, senor."

"Can I send you and your men off to your schooner?"

"Thank you, Senor Commandante, but I wish to go ashore first, and then I will find a shore boat to run off in," and bidding adieu to the commandante and his officers, Seawaif asked to be set ashore with his men, which was promptly done.

As he reached the landing a party on horseback dashed by.

They were Don Gonzalvo, the Senorita Amabel, riding side by side, and behind them a short distance two peons, who were their attendants.

They did not see the youth, and he passed on to the tavern, where he at once put up.

As he went to his room he saw Juan Lerdo, his peon spy, gazing after him and he made a motion to him to follow.

A moment after the door opened softly and the peon entered.

"Senor, I am glad to see you again," he said, politely.

"I came ashore to see you, Juan."

"Yes, senor; how can I serve you?"

"Find me a boat to send my men off in to the schooner, and I wish to have them start just about dark."

"I will run them off, senor, as you desire."

"No, I wish you to get a man to take them off who is willing to tell a lie if need be."

"Senor, I can readily find one who would lie against his brother for a peso."

"I merely wish him to say, if asked, that I went off with my men, while I need your services for something else."

"Command me, senor."

"I wish you to secure two good horses, one for each of us, and have them ready near the edge of the town."

"I will go with you as soon as my men have started, and I wish you to be my guide."

"Where would you go, senor?"

"Do you know the hacienda of Don Gonzalvo?"

"Yes, senor."

"I would go there."

"I can guide you, senor."

"How far is it?"

"Five leagues, senor."

"We can ride it in two hours?"

"Yes, senor, with the use of the spur."

"Very well, secure the horses and have them in readiness."

"Then get the boatman to carry my men off to the Sea Cat, and come here for us at sunset."

"I will be present, senor," was the answer, and Juan Lerdo's eyes sparkled as the lad slipped into his hand a couple of golden onzas.

CHAPTER XXIII.

SEAWAIF'S VISIT.

TRUE to his promise, Juan Lerdo had the boat ready, to carry off the seamen of the schooner,

and came up to the tavern just at dark to report to Seawaif.

The boy lieutenant had enjoyed his supper, and the men had done likewise, so were ready to go off, and the party started for the shore.

The boatman was certainly one who would not hesitate about telling a lie, even for a small consideration, if one might judge from his appearance, for he looked like a cut-throat.

"My man, run these men out to the schooner, which you have seen standing off and on in the offing."

"Yes, senor."

"Upon your return, if you are asked if all of us went, of course I wish it understood that we did."

"Yes, senor, so it shall be."

"Here is a golden *onza* for you, so now be off, and be where you can be found to-night, should I wish to go off later."

"I will return here, senor," and having seen the little craft set sail to join the schooner, Seawaif walked rapidly away with Juan Lerdo, who led him to a mesquite thicket outside of the hamlet where two horses were in hiding.

Mounting the animals Seawaif and the peon set off at a rapid pace, and the horses proving good they came in sight of the lights of the Gonzalvo Hacienda within two hours.

A gateman allowed them to enter, and in answer to the Boy Lieutenant's query, said that the Don and Senorita Amabel had returned home a few hours before.

In answer to his request to see the Don and the senorita, Seawaif was shown into the handsomely-furnished sitting-room where the father and daughter sat, and who supposed the visitor to be some one from a neighboring hacienda.

At the sight of the youth they both arose, for to them he was a stranger, and he was attired in his handsome uniform.

"Pardon a visit from a stranger, Don Gonzalvo and senorita, but I am a junior officer of the schooner-of-war Sea Cat, Captain Achille Murtagh commanding, and have come to see you upon an important duty," said Seawaif in his pleasant way, which at once gained for him the respect of the Don and his daughter; the latter replying:

"My dear young senor, both the Senorita Amabel and myself are glad to meet any one from a vessel to whose commander we owe so much, and we trust that you come with no ill-tidings of Captain Murtagh."

"No, Don Gonzalvo, Captain Murtagh was unharmed in the action with the brig-of-war Patrol, though of course we suffered severely in such a hot combat at close quarters."

At the words that Murtagh was unharmed Seawaif heard a fervent prayer of thankfulness pass the lips of Amabel, while the Don said with enthusiasm:

"A hot action indeed, young senor! it was the boldest thing I ever saw attempted, for your commander to fight the brig, and we had not the slightest idea of your victory."

"My daughter felt so anxious about the affair, for it was reported that your schooner was off the coast, and I knew that Captain Rosal would attack her, that we rode down to learn what we could, and the result was that we witnessed your victory, though I could not understand why you left the Mexican colors flying and then came on with the Patrol into port, the schooner remaining outside."

"The fact was, senor, that Captain Rosal decided that the Sea Cat was a pirate craft, and he was determined to capture her and hang Captain Murtagh, but failed to carry out his intentions, as you saw, as he did also to kill him in his duel with him."

"Yes, Rosal seems to feel the deepest hatred for your commander; but I trust that he was not wounded through his foolhardiness."

"No, senor, Captain Rosal was unharmed; but it is on his account that I have come to see you to-night."

"Indeed, young senor, and may I ask why?" said Don Gonzalvo, curious as to the nature of the visit of the youth in behalf of Captain Rosal.

"To give you my reasons for what I tell you regarding Captain Rosal, Don Gonzalvo, I must say that he is one whom I have known from my earliest childhood, and aware of what he is, I have determined to thwart him in his intention of making Senorita Gonzalvo his wife."

"One whom I should have respected and loved, for he became my elder brother, through his marriage with my sister, he showed himself to be a man whom I could but hate."

"My sister and myself were orphans, and he was our guardian, for my father believed him to be a noble man, and knew that poor Inez loved him."

"From the day of their marriage he cruelly treated her, tried to break her heart by his inhuman conduct toward both of us, and at last forced us to fly from our home."

"He followed us, and the scar on his face I gave him, and it prevented our capture; but my sister died of a broken heart, and our little vessel, in which we escaped was wrecked, and I alone survived; and was picked up by Captain Murtagh, and he is the only friend I have known."

"Here are papers telling who I am, and the story of our wrongs, my sister and mine, written by poor Inez herself, and I give them into your keeping, senorita, that they may be a warning to you not to become the wife of that man, who ill-treated his young wife, drove her to her death, and now is rich upon her fortune and mine."

"This is terrible," said Don Gonzalvo excitedly and with amazement.

"Yes, a terrible charge that you make, my young friend."

"It is true, senor," was the quiet response.

"Ay, father, I believe it all, and Heaven bless this noble youth for saving me from that man, for you were determined that I should marry him," and Senorita Amabel arose and paced the floor in deep excitement, while Don Gonzalvo looked over the papers which Seawaif had handed to him and said earnestly as he finished their perusal:

"Forgive me, my child, for urging that Luis Rosal, the man whose crimes are herein told, should be your husband; and you, my noble youth, accept my gratitude unbounded for having saved me from bestowing my daughter, my idol, upon such a being as these papers prove Captain Rosal to be, and I cannot doubt their truth."

"The hand that wrote those lines, senor, is cold in death," was Seawaif's low response.

CHAPTER XXIV.

SEAWAIF'S STORY.

FOR some moments, after the scene narrated in the foregoing chapter, Seawaif, the Don and Amabel sat in silence, each buried in deep thought.

At last the youth broke the silence with:

"Senor and senorita, I have felt revengeful toward Captain Rosal, as you very well understand, and to-day I avenged myself in part, through the kindness of my noble commander, who allowed me to fight the schooner in my own way and defeat the brig."

"Captain Rosal handed to me his sword, upon his own deck, and I told him who was his victor, and demanded of him my fortune."

"He wished me to give him time, and I promised him the Government should not know of his acts if he gave up my riches, and he pledged himself to do so."

"But I did not tell him that you should not know, and in making known the secret to you, I beg you to keep it quiet, as his punishment will be great, senorita, in losing you, in giving up his wealth, and in the defeat which he has met with at the hands of a boy."

"I knew that Captain Murtagh was deeply interested in you, lady, and that you had called up from the past a love which he had believed could not be aroused again."

"Pardon me, senorita, for speaking plainly; but I am only a boy, you know, and I love my benefactor so dearly, I do not wish him to have another sorrow, for, as I said, he mourns for a dead love, and I know that you have touched his heart."

"He is a noble man, lady, and one who left his American home to drown his sorrows, and upon his life there rests no stain."

"He is a noble-looking man, young senor, and we owe much to him, while you are a strong pleader for him; but why was it, pray tell me, that when he ran into the midst of the fleet of the Lagoon Pirates, he was enabled to escape, and in fact, held communication with the pirate chief?"

"Don Gonzalvo, you are aware that the Pirates of the Lagoon have a flag they deem almost sacred?"

"Yes, so I have heard."

"They call it the Flag of the Red Hands."

"Yes, so I know."

"A vessel flying this flag, in a certain way, is no longer looked upon by these Lagoon Pirates as a foe, and, without further molestation it is allowed to go its way."

"But your captain not only showed this flag of the Red Hands, but communicated with the pirate chief," urged Don Gonzalvo.

"Senor, Captain Murtagh showed the flag, but sent me to communicate with the chief."

"You?"

"Yes, senor, so I know all that occurred."

"Well, are you adverse to telling?"

"Oh, no, for it will clear my chief of the belief that he is a pirate."

"I will be glad to have every suspicion taken from my mind, I assure you," said the Don.

"It shall not be my fault, senor if you still believe the chief a pirate, for I think you alone in that belief, as the senorita feels that he is not what Captain Rosal would have her think."

"The circumstances of Captain Murtagh's escape, as reported by a courier, pointed to his alliance with the Pirates of the Lagoon; but I felt that he was not the man Captain Rosal declared him to be," quietly said Amabel.

"I thank you, senorita, and I will quickly explain why we were not captured by the pirates, into whose absolute power we placed ourselves in running into the retreat of El Moro."

"The fact was that Captain Murtagh determined to prove what virtue there was in the Flag of the Red Hands, and hoisting it at the peak we boldly sailed into the den of the cut-laws."

"The effect was magical, for when they opened fire at first, it quickly ceased when the Red Hand Flag went up."

"Then I was sent by my captain on board the pirate flag-ship, and met El Moro."

"He received me well, wondered at the schooner's flying his flag, but respected it, and more, he gave me this ring, which he said would protect me under all circumstances when I fell into the clutches of the Lagoon Pirates," and Seawaif drew off the ring and handed it to the Senorita Amabel, who, after admiring its beauty handed it to her father.

"You have a valuable souvenir here, Senor Seawaif, and one that may save your life at some time," said the Don.

Then Seawaif continued:

"Of course El Moro respected the flag, shown by Captain Murtagh, and I returned on board the schooner, which at once put to sea, and headed for the port near here."

"Then it was that Captain Murtagh told me of the Secret Signet of the two red hands, and the power of the flag."

"He said that he was cruising along one night when he saw a vessel close inshore, and recognized her as the craft of a cruel coast pirate off the Balize."

"Those on the outlaw craft evidently did not see the schooner, and ran right upon her, so that, after a sharp action she was captured."

"Captain Murtagh found on board a fair captive of the pirate, and upon finding out who she was took her at once to her home."

"That home was the retreat of buccaneers, and she was the daughter of El Moro."

"In his gratitude at the restoration of his daughter, whom he deeply loved, El Moro gave the Secret Signet ring and flag to Captain Murtagh, telling him to make use of them, if ever he got into a hot place with the Lagoon Pirates."

"He made use of it, as I have told you, and with the result that you already know."

"Such are the circumstances of Captain Murtagh's being leagued with pirates."

"And I am sure that your explanation is more than satisfactory, my lad; and I am anxious to meet your chief, that I may ask him to become my guest whenever it pleases him to put into port, and I only wish that he was in our own service," said Don Gonzalvo.

"Senor, it is upon this subject that I also wished to see you, and when I make known to you the story of Captain Murtagh's life, and his wishes, I feel that you will use your influence to aid him in the accomplishment of his desires."

"I will do all in my power, my young friend, for both yourself and your captain, for I owe much to you."

"I do not wish to put it upon the plea of gratitude, senor, for we wish no payment for what our duty prompted."

"Captain Murtagh is an American, as he doubtless told you."

"He possessed riches, and was in the American navy, but left it on account of a rivalry that existed between himself and a brother officer, who loved a lady that was affianced to my commander."

"The officer told a falsehood against Captain Murtagh, which caused the lady to break off her engagement with him, yet without giving any cause."

"Discovering who it was who had maligned him, Captain Murtagh resigned from the navy, challenged his traducer and killed him in a duel, after which he left the United States, bought a

schooner, armed and equipped her, and offered his services to Cartagena.

"His term of voluntary service expires within a week, and, as he owns his schooner, he is desirous of offering the services of his vessel and himself to Mexico, and this is what I would like to have you place before your Government, señor."

"I will do so with pleasure, and at once, my young friend, and feel that I can pledge you my word that I will bring for answer the acceptance of your captain's offer."

"But what about yourself?"

"Oh, señor, I shall regain my fortune from Captain Rosal, and, after I have devoted myself to study for a couple of years, will get an appointment in the Mexican navy, for I love the sea, and am a good sailor for my years."

"You are indeed, my lad; but let me propose that you get a private tutor and make my house your home."

"You shall be captain of my *carrera*, and you can certainly enjoy life as well as study."

"What do you say?"

"Yes, Señor Seawaif, I too beg you to do as my father says, and you will make us both very happy," joined in Amabel.

"I am so thankful to have found such good friends, that I cannot refuse, so I will do as you wish, but now I must return to the port and run out to the schooner to tell Captain Murtagh the good news," said Seawaif, and, after a hearty supper he set out upon his return, just as the clock in the wing tower of the hacienda tolled midnight.

CHAPTER XXV.

THE COMBAT BY THE ROADSIDE.

JUAN LERDO was delighted with his visit to Gonzalvo Hacienda, and, as he rode along with Seawaif, on their way back to the port, he dwelt upon the hospitable manner in which he had been treated.

"I think I shall have to engage you in my service, Juan, as I may remain ashore for some time, and you seem to be a faithful fellow," said Seawaif.

"Ah, señor, golden *onzas* would make any one faithful; but I have acted for you from friendship as well as gold."

"Well, Juan, you may consider yourself under my pay," was the answer, and the two then rode on in silence for some time.

At length the lights of the port came in sight, and just then two men stepped out into the road before the two horsemen.

The moon was shining brightly, and Seawaif at once recognized Captain Rosal and his friend, Leon Riveras.

"Well, señor?" he said, as he drew rein before them.

"Boy, where have you been?" fiercely demanded Luis Rosal, his voice trembling with rage.

"To your question, señor, I might say that it was none of your business; but I will frankly answer you that I have been to the Gonzalvo Hacienda," was Seawaif's response, in a voice that was unmoved by the surprise he had received.

"For what purpose?" hissed Rosal.

"To inform Don Gonzalvo and the beautiful Senorita Amabel of your character."

"Ha! you have dared lie to them about me?"

"I have told them the truth."

"Well, you wear the uniform of an officer, and pretend to be a man, so I fling the lie in your teeth and dare you to resent it."

"Señor, you wear a sword and pistols, as I do, and had I a second, as you have in Captain Riveras, I would say that I would promptly meet you; but, I will be glad to do so at any other time."

"No, you shall dismount and meet me now, or I shall shoot you from your saddle," cried the infuriated man.

"No, no, Rosal, give the boy a chance, and say to-morrow you will meet him, that he may get a second."

"No, for his second will be that pirate, Murtagh, and he will hold us both to answer to him for challenging a boy."

"He must fight now, unless he is a coward."

"All right, I'll act for both of you," said Leon Riveras.

"Permit me to act as my Boy Lieutenant's second!" and suddenly, out of the thicket, stepped Achille Murtagh.

A curse broke from the lips of Luis Rosal, while Leon Riveras dropped his hand upon his pistol.

"Hold, señors! I am not merely a looker-on

here," cried Juan Lerdo, and a pistol was held in each hand, and the weapons were aimed at the two Mexican officers.

They saw that they were entrapped, and Captain Murtagh remarked in his cool way:

"Señors, after allowing my lieutenant to come ashore, I feared treachery toward him, so landed at a point above and put a spy upon your movements, Captain Rosal."

"The result was my coming here to thwart your little plot, and I am here to serve as the second of my Boy Lieutenant."

"Dismount, Seawaif, and meet Captain Rosal, with sword or pistol, as he may select."

"Let the weapons be pistols," sullenly said Luis Rosal, and the weapons were quickly loaded by Captain Murtagh and Leon Riveras, and the man and the boy placed ten paces apart.

Captain Murtagh won the word, and his deep tones were soon heard:

"Señors, are you ready?"

"I am," coolly responded Seawaif, while Luis Rosal nodded.

"Fire!"

The pistols flashed almost together, but one a trifle before the other.

That one was held by Seawaif, and its bullet went straight to the heart of Luis Rosal, whose shot, well aimed, cut deep into the shoulder of the Boy Lieutenant, making an ugly, but not serious, wound.

"Señor, we will leave you with the body of your friend; but I shall be glad to stop at your quarters and send you aid," said Achille Murtagh.

"I thank you, señor, and shall feel obliged," was Leon Riveras's answer.

"You will oblige me by stating this affair as it occurred; if to the contrary, Señor Riveras, there will be two of us to whom you will have to answer," continued the Cartagenian.

"It shall be truthfully told, señors," and Leon Riveras bowed as the others departed from the fatal field.

CHAPTER XXVI.

CONCLUSION.

UPON reaching the port Captain Murtagh left the horses in the care of Juan Lerdo, and taking a boat set sail for the schooner, where Seawaif was quickly placed under the care of the surgeon on board, while the vessel set sail and, by daylight was far away upon the waters of the Gulf.

Juan Lerdo in the mean time went to the military quarters and sent aid to Captain Leon Riveras, who, while watching by the body of Luis Rosal, congratulated himself that a rival had been removed from his path, and began to build castles in the air of future happiness with Amabel Gonzalvo as his wife.

Having made his report of the affair to the commandante, Captain Riveras determined to give himself the pleasure of reporting the death of Luis Rosal to Don Gonzalvo and his daughter, and mounting his horse he rode rapidly toward the hacienda, anxious to arrive there to breakfast.

This he did, and he was delighted to see that the death of her lover did not seem to wear heavily upon the heart of the fair girl, who merely remarked, that while she was shocked to hear of his being slain in a duel with the Boy Lieutenant, it was a just retribution.

Returning to the town Leon Riveras had his dead rival buried with great warlike pomp, and while the fort was firing a salute over the slain officer, the schooner Sea Cat was seen running into port.

She saluted the forts, and dropping anchor a boat went ashore in which were Captain Murtagh and his Boy Lieutenant, the latter wearing his arm in a sling.

At the landing Don Gonzalvo met them, and the party started at once for the Mexican hacienda, where, after a week's stay Achille Murtagh received his commission as a captain in the Mexican navy.

Nor was this all, for soon after Amabel Gonzalvo became his promised bride, to the great sorrow of Leon Riveras, who, however, determined to make the best of it, as he wished no quarrel with the commander of the Sea Cat.

As for Seawaif, he received back his fortune, of which Luis Rosal had robbed him, and yet made his home at Gonzalvo Hacienda during the two years he devoted to study, after which he entered the Mexican navy, in which, in time, he rose to high command, and rendered great service for his country, though he was always remembered as Seawaif, the Boy Lieutenant.

THE END.

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